

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES: DISCOVERING AND LIVING IN UNITY

SCOTT M. TAYLOR

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

A Dissertation Submitted to the Education Faculty  
of the University of St. Thomas in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree

Doctor of Education

November 13, 2001

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

St. Paul, Minnesota

This dissertation for the Education Doctorate degree by

Scott M. Taylor

has been approved by a dissertation committee comprised of  
the following members:

---

Bruce H. Kramer, Ph.D.  
Committee Chair

---

Katherine E. Egan, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Donald R. LaMagdeleine, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Thomas G. McCarver, M.Ed.  
Committee Member

---

Date

In memory of:

Mary Frances and Nolan Randall

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My committee chair, Dr. Bruce Kramer, gets a special thank you for agreeing to chair my committee and for his guidance and persistence in getting this right. His scholarly integrity, intuition, and courage will always guide me. The other members of my committee--Dr. Katherine Egan, Dr. Donald LaMagdeleine, and Tom McCarver--were of great help in framing and giving objective advice when I needed it most.

This task would have been impossible without the love and support of Anne Hunter and Brett and Gretchen Taylor. I am richly blessed because of them.

At various points during the researching and writing of this dissertation, the following persons were of invaluable help: Sharon Taylor, Orval and Emma Quarstad, Chuck Smith, John King and the "Dissertation Boot Camp," Mirja Hanson, Darlene Leiding, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and the members of Cohort X.

P.M.H. Atwater, Joseph Jaworski, Otto Scharmer, and Joe McMoneagle gave of their time, talents, and insight.

A heartfelt thank you is extended to the experiencers who shared their story, heart, and life. Meeting and working with you has been a gift beyond measure.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b> . . . . .	iv
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> . . . . .	v
<b>TABLE OF TABLES</b> . . . . .	viii
<b>TABLE OF FIGURES</b> . . . . .	ix
<b>ABSTRACT</b> . . . . .	x
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b> . . . . .	1
Autobiographical Account . . . . .	2
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</b> . . . . .	7
Historical Perspective . . . . .	7
Resistance to Research . . . . .	10
Contemporary Near-Death Studies . . . . .	12
Personal Accounts . . . . .	24
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY: The Seeker Meets Academia</b> . . . . .	25
Background: Symbolic Interactionism Principles of Investigation . . . . .	26
A Theoretical Framework: Ethnography . . . . .	28
Research Design . . . . .	33
Study Setting . . . . .	33
Selection of Subjects . . . . .	34
Criteria . . . . .	34
Participants for the Study . . . . .	37
Interview Format . . . . .	38
Interview Schedule . . . . .	39
Interview Process . . . . .	40
Data Collection . . . . .	40
Data Analysis . . . . .	44
The Researcher: Beliefs and Biases . . . . .	44
Protection of Participants . . . . .	45
<b>CHAPTER 4: MARTHA</b> . . . . .	47
Martha's Story . . . . .	50
Reflection . . . . .	68
<b>CHAPTER 5: HOLLY</b> . . . . .	72
Holly's Story . . . . .	73
Reflection . . . . .	87

<b>CHAPTER 6: ZACHARY</b>	91
Zachary's Story	92
Reflection	102
<b>CHAPTER 7: JOHN.</b>	104
John's Story	105
Reflection	114
<b>CHAPTER 8: UNITY</b>	116
Unity as the Dominant Theme.	117
We live in an energetic universe	121
Time is eternal and the nature of God.	122
All of creation is one with God and therefore interconnected	124
All of creation is conscious	126
God's energy is Love	129
All of creation is as it should be	130
We create our own experiences	132
In unity there is truth	136
Unity Model	137
Reflection	141
<b>CHAPTER 9: FREEDOM</b>	144
Freedom From.	145
Self	145
Society.	148
Environment	148
Freedom To	150
Self	150
Society.	154
Environment	154
Reflection	158
<b>CHAPTER 10: MY JOURNEY</b>	160
Astrolabe Metaphor	161
Unity Orientation	165
The Link between Freedom and Unity	172
Conscious Commitment	174
<b>AFTERWORD: NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES AND LEADERSHIP</b>	177
<b>REFERENCES</b>	185

## **APPENDICES**

- A: Composition of Participants
- B: Intake Form for Potential Interviewees
- C: Recruiting Advertisement
- D: Consent Form
- E: Follow-up Letter
- F: List of Guiding Questions
- G: Comment Letter
- H: Martha's Drawing

## TABLE OF TABLES

1. Comparison of the essence of the non-physical and physical worlds concerning basic social structures and behavior patterns



## TABLE OF FIGURES

1. Unity Model
2. Astrolabe
3. Manifest Leadership Model

# Near-Death Experiences: Discovering and living in unity

Scott M. Taylor

University of St. Thomas, 2001

Chairperson: Bruce H. Kramer, Ph.D.

## Abstract

This autobiographical ethnography describes the evolution of a participant observer's understanding about the nature of the near-death experience. The data reflect the author's comprehension as themes presented themselves. The cosmologies that account for participants' experiences in both physical and non-physical worlds are identified. The primary findings were the identification of a transitional experience and the identification and description of unity as the structure of the non-physical world. The physical world is identified as one of duality and as a subset of the unity universe. Participants responded to unity by learning and bringing back to the physical world behaviors indicating that more freedom had entered their lives. Understanding issues of unity and freedom requires readers to step outside their dualistic perspective. Near-death experiencers must choose the set of rules--those of unity or duality--that will govern their perspective and actions in the physical world.

Twenty-six adult participants were involved in this qualitative study. Interviews with four participants are featured so that the reader can acquire both an intellectual and a visceral understanding of the data. In addition, experts in the field were interviewed. Each participant met a series of requirements. Lengthy, semi-structured interviews were used. Follow-up interviews with family were sometimes conducted to verify and enhance the interviewer's understanding. The interviews were analyzed for content, process, and

theme. Included is a review of the literature that shows a great deal of research describing near-death experiences. However, little research was conducted to identify a cosmology that accounts for participants' experiences.

*Phases and Times*

Though following with an upward mind,  
the wonders that have come to me,  
but evermore a life behind.  
Strange that I felt so gay,  
strange that I tried today,  
ask me no more:  
What answer should I give?  
With music in the growing days of Time,  
with her laughter or her sighs,  
I make the netted sunbeam dance.  
I slip, I slide, I gloom, I glance,  
for she is earthy of the mind,  
but wisdom blessed of the soul  
and every thought breaks out a rose.  
Bright came the sun next day,  
all things forgotten beside,  
filled was her heart with love,  
and the dawn of an opening heaven.  
Feeling is deep and still, therefore,  
trust to thy heart and to what the world calls illusions.

*-Letitia*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

“At the heart of every story is Mystery. The reasons we attribute to events may be far different from their true cause. Often our first interpretation of events is quite different from our last reading of them. Mystery is a process and so is our understanding of it.”

*--Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.*

Medical science has advanced to a point where medical teams routinely return humans from the brink of death. When these persons recover, many of them tell amazing stories of what lies beyond the physical universe. They relate stories of tunnels, life reviews, meeting dead relatives, angelic beings, universal knowledge, and God. Such profound experiences affect these individuals forever.

My interest was in studying persons who have had a near-death experience. The original concept of this study focused on the question: How do they live with what they know? In order to answer this question, two questions needed to be probed in detail: What do experiencers learn, and how does that knowledge affect their behavior? But a funny thing happened on the way to this academic forum. The experiencers, their stories, and the interview process profoundly affected me. The result is my story, my quest to understand the nature of being human and of God.

In exploring near-death experiences, this study featured persons who have had peak experiences of the most profound nature. The glimpse they had of their transitional experience answered questions about the nature of human existence and the structure of the universe. This qualitative study attempted to advance the body of literature

surrounding the near-death experience by exploring a new cosmology that helps explain the events that occur during a near-death experience and their aftereffects.

This paper describes the commonalities and differences among near-death experiencers and how they negotiated their actions in the post-experience world. My goal was to provide the grist for the changes that occurred in me, including my understanding of how the universe works. Near-death experiencers have a unique perspective. Their contribution to our understanding of the nature of human existence and to our relationships with others and the world seems both timely and needed. This information gives us a view of human potential from a "post-life" perspective. The self-concept of who we are and what we can be reflects the social constructs in which we dwell. The perspective of near-death experiencers gives us pause to examine these constructs, the foundations upon which we build relationships with the physical world and other living beings.

### Autobiographical Account

I came to this study with personal experience. Twenty years ago, I was in love with a wonderful woman, Mary Frances Randall, and her son, Nolan. Driving home after a beautiful summer's day of sailing lessons, she made a fatal mistake that changed our lives forever. In attempting to make a left-hand turn onto a two-lane county highway, Mary Fran was blinded by the setting sun and pulled out in front of an oncoming car. It struck the driver's side door, killing her instantly. Nolan sustained severe head trauma and was rushed to St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester, Minnesota. Mortally wounded, he fought for five days in a battle his body could not win.

Nolan was the first grandchild in a family of nine children. During the days he struggled, friends and relatives arrived to lend support and prayers. We kept an around-the-clock vigil at his bedside. Mary Fran's sister, Jan, and I had the 3 to 5 a.m. shift on the fifth day after the accident. We read Nolan stories, told him about all the friends and relatives who had come to support him, and comforted him as best we could. Toward the end of our shift, Jan, a registered nurse with years of experience in trauma care, looked again at Nolan's chart and vital signs displayed on the myriad of electronic monitors. It was clear where Nolan's vital signs were heading. With tears brimming in her eyes, Jan held out her hand to me and gently pulled me into the chair by Nolan's head. "It's time," she said. Jan leaned over and whispered into his ear, "Nolan, you've been a very good and very brave boy. It's OK to go and join your mother. It's OK for you to leave. You have fought so hard and been such a good boy. It's OK to leave. We love you." With this we left the room and joined the sleeping relatives camped out in all manner of chairs and sofas in the crowded waiting room.

Within the next hour, Nolan's nurse roused us from fitful sleep and quietly indicated that it was time to say goodbye. The Randall family gathered around his bed. There were so many members that by the time I entered the room, they were three rows deep around his bed. I sat on the windowsill in an effort to be comfortable during this vigil. As Nolan's brainwave patterns flattened and the monitor beside his bed sounded the constant, unwavering tone of brain death, every member of his extended family wept, except for me. I was overcome with an indescribable joy and love that transported me into a realm where ecstasy is a pale description of what I felt. Where I went, I had no idea at the time. I was fully conscious, fully present in the room with the grieving Randall family. Yet simultaneously I was lifted to a place beyond description. I experienced

bi-location: two fully conscious vantage points, one on the window sill next to Willy, Mary Fran's brother, and a second one somewhere in another dimension embraced by Mary Fran and Nolan as she guided her son farther into the Light. I stayed with the two of them as long as I was able/permitted. I then rejoined my body in the hospital ward some minutes later.

Looking around the room at the quietly grieving people, I suppressed my sense of joyfulness. It seemed inappropriate to share my experience because it didn't fit the mood of the moment and because I could not put into words what had just happened to me. I had no frame of reference with which to describe such an event. So I kept quiet.

I thought I knew how the world worked, until that moment. My experience with Nolan's death wasn't described in any religious or secular literature of which I was aware. It wasn't part of my family's belief structure or the lexicon of the Presbyterian Church in which I was raised. As a result, I was totally unprepared for the consequences of my experience and my radically altered worldview. I wanted to touch that place again. I wanted to know what had happened to me.

My search for understanding began in the first year after Mary Fran and Nolan's transition. I learned to cope with my grief in their absence. I earnestly prayed to know why this happened in the way that it did. Curiously, friends, books, and television shows appeared just when I needed them, answering some of my questions. Then, while on a business trip to New York City, I chanced to meet Hilda Brown, a professional psychic, at the baggage claim area of JFK airport. We dated for three years, and she opened possibilities unimagined by a young man of Midwestern roots. I arrived early for our first date. Hilda ushered me into her living room while she finished getting ready for a night at the theater. While I was looking at her immense collection of esoteric books, one literally



fell off the top shelf and landed in my hands. It was R. Monroe's *Journeys out of the Body* (1971). I called to Hilda, describing this strange scene. She suggested that I borrow it and see what it had to say to me. I did, and, after the play, retired to my hotel room to read a few pages. I finished the book at 4:30 a.m. and remember thinking, "People can do this stuff? On purpose?" What had happened to me at Nolan's bedside was described within those pages. I wanted to know more.

The search started by what was termed my "out of body" experience was now fully engaged. Instead of being driven from some inside force, I was instead drawn toward some invisible goal. I never knew what the next learning would be, or how it would be presented to me. Yet it unfolded with a noticeable pattern and remarkable grace.

Over the next 15 years, my search took me far and wide. I visited The Monroe Institute (TMI) and learned conscious out-of-body travel. The work was so enriching that I decided to become a trainer for TMI and continue that relationship to this day. I traveled to Peru to study initiation rites of Peruvian shamans. I visited and studied the ancient religious sites and rites of Greece, Turkey, and Egypt. I entered the New Seminary, an interfaith seminary dedicated to assisting persons in the helping professions to add a spiritual component to their work. My teachers were rabbis, sheiks, ministers, and priests. I was struck by how much all faiths have in common and how little the differences mean. After ordination, I traveled to Japan to study the sacred nature of Japanese traditional arts with the Oomoto sect of the Shinto religion. One tenet of their belief system is that practitioners who create art use the same creative force that God used to create the universe. That creative force was what I wanted to touch, and I did. I became a voracious reader. I started attending spiritual workshops and retreats. I grew in understanding.

In 1993, while on a business trip to Seattle, I walked into a bookstore and felt compelled to pick out an unassuming book by P. M. H. Atwater on near-death experiences. In it, I discovered that I was not alone in my experience or my quest for meaning. Some persons attending deathbed transitions had reported an event called a “near-death-like” experience. I finally had a name for what happened! It matched my experience. It really was real! Because I had not suffered the physical body trauma normally associated with near-death experiences, I had felt outside of any explanation or help the near-death experience literature might have offered. Here, it was described and validated.

The next step in my spiritual journey was to take an interest in doctoral studies. In considering doctoral programs, I looked for institutions that would support my interest in leadership and my desire to write a dissertation about God and spirituality. I was fortunate to find this support in a program and an advisor at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul.

I have come to be more at peace. Exploring the near-death experience with those who have touched that space has helped me find some answers to the unarticulated questions imbedded into my soul during those brief moments at Nolan’s bedside. Yet, I know this dissertation is but a brief stop on the way to another forum of discovery. What follows is my understanding derived from the stories of the incredible experiencers I was privileged to meet.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

This chapter is an exploration of the literature that defines a near-death experience and how near-death experiencers live with what they know. The purpose for reviewing previously written articles and books was to develop an understanding of the nature of the near-death experience, controversies surrounding current research, and the breadth of subjects under consideration. My search of databases revealed a significant body of phenomenological research on near-death experience in both scientific and trade journals. However, there was little research identifying a cosmology that accounts for participants' experiences. This literature review is divided into four sections. The first section provides an overview of the historical documentation of near-death experiences. The second details the resistance to research encountered with the rise of the scientific method. The third details contemporary near-death studies. The final section presents personal accounts of historical and contemporary figures.

### Historical Perspective

The nature of our being and what part of that being survives after death has puzzled humankind since time began. Burial practices of prehistoric and ancient cultures indicated belief in an afterlife. As the science of writing developed, these complex beliefs and practices were portrayed in ancient texts. In what is thought to be the oldest known text on this subject, *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, there is a collection of prayers and

injunctions designed to assist the dying individual's journey into the next world (Carr, 1996; Faulkner, 1994; Rawlings, 1978; & Ross, 1979).

The ancient Greeks believed in the existence of an immortal soul. Plato (428-384 BCE) saw immortality as an intrinsic part of our nature. He held that, when a person dies, the soul leaves the physical body, encounters a bright light, undergoes a life review, is consequently judged for actions while on earth, and then encounters previously deceased relatives and friends. In the 10th book of *The Republic*, Plato wrote about a soldier, Er, who after being severely wounded on the field of battle was thought dead and placed on a funeral pyre. Er revived in time to save himself from cremation and then told tales of his experiences while "dead." He stated that he was allowed to return in order to tell others of their potential fate following death. (Carr, 1996; Rawlings, 1978).

Christianity assumes the immortality of the soul and supplies us with numerous examples supporting life after death. Paul made mention of this in his second letter to the Corinthians (5:1, 7-10):

For we know that when this tent we live in now is taken down--when we die and leave these bodies--we will have wonderful new bodies in heaven, homes that will be ours forevermore, made for us by God himself, and not by human hands. . . . We know that these things are true by believing, not by seeing. And we are not afraid, but are quite content to die, for then we will be at home with the Lord. So our aim is to please Him always in everything we do, whether here in this body or away from this body and with Him in heaven. For we must all stand before Christ to be judged and have our lives laid bare--before Him (*The Living Bible: The one year bible*, 1985, np).

In the letter, Paul mentions a spiritual body, life review, and judgment, common elements contained within much of contemporary near-death literature.

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* reflects widely held beliefs in Eastern cultures and religions about the existence of an afterlife (Evans-Wentz, 1960). This ancient text

assisted persons charged with preparing and guiding the departing souls through various stages of the afterlife.

A Swedish mathematician, inventor, civil engineer, physicist, metallurgist, and parliamentarian, Emanuel Swedenborg experienced out-of-body travel after two epiphanies in 1744 and 1745. He continued having encounters with deceased persons in the years that followed. The spiritual truths conveyed in those encounters helped him define the nature of out-of-body and near-death experiences. In 1758, he presented the nature of the spiritual world he experienced in *Heaven and Hell* (Dole, 1998).

Swedenborg claimed that there is constant interplay between the spiritual world and the earthly world, serving as the source of our emotions and ideas. He stated that humans are a marriage of spirit with a mortal body. Swedenborg also discussed ideas that would later be associated with near-death phenomena: deceased elderly becoming young again; afterlife existence within a nonmaterial world perceived according to the arrangement of ideas and images created within our own minds; and existence in an afterworld in which time has no meaning and space is signified in emotional terms, designated by how “close” we are to those like ourselves. His writings captured the interest of a great many people, sparking the creation of a significant human development movement (Rhodes in Walker and Serdahely, 1990).

From 1700 to 1800, physicians, clergy, and others ministering to the dying collected a wealth of near-death experience stories. Accounts in the 1820s of near-death experiences by American Chippewa Indians described warriors who traveled outside their bodies at the moment of death and later returned to tell of their spiritual adventures (Schorer in Walker and Serdahely, 1990). In *Lancet*, the journal of the British Medical

Association, Cardinal Archbishop Donnet of Bordeaux documented a near-death experience in 1866 (Walker and Serdahely, 1990).

Albert Heim, a Swiss geologist, interviewed mountain climbers who survived a near-fatal fall in 1892. In Heim's published accounts of 37 interviews, these individuals described their experience of calmness, sensations of being detached from their physical bodies, and feelings of joy during the moments that they believed they were going to die (Zaleski, 1987).

### Resistance to Research

Near-death research began running into roadblocks in the 17th Century when Sir Francis Bacon and the Royal Society of London started replacing doctrines of faith with scientific method as the valid source of truth. Because near-death experiences evoked religious imagery of the afterlife, conceptions of the dual nature of self (body and soul) were seen by some scientists as competing with scientific inquiry. Scientific methodology embraced philosophies of empiricism and positivism and a materialist conception of the self (body only). "The philosophies of science discourage any attractions to worlds that cannot be seen (empiricism) or for which there are no mathematical proofs (positivism)" (Kellehear, 1996, p. 167). Under this view, a suitable subject for inquiry had to be measured within the realms of natural law. Because observation was the only acceptable information-gathering mechanism, any subject not meeting these criteria was not welcomed. Thus, near-death research was not considered credible or worthy of scientific pursuit (Ross, 1979).

Ian Stevenson noted three distinct periods of research from 1880 to the present. During 1880-1930, near-death experience research consisted mainly of collected stories

of the paranormal. The English spiritualist movement documented most of these. Frederic W.H. Myers, a leading member of the Society of Psychical Research, reported three purposes for researching life after death:

1. To increase our total understanding of the universe.
2. To expand the focus of all science and philosophy to include “knowledge of life in man independent of blood and brain.”
3. To apply this newfound knowledge to open limitless avenues for further discovery (Ross, 1979).

By 1900, the theory of subliminal consciousness identified the possible multidimensional nature of our being. However, rigid scientific attitudes kept psychologists from exploring the nature of near-death experience in any significant manner (Walker & Serdahely, 1990).

During 1930-1960, near-death experiences were generally ignored. Due to the poor reception that research in the area had engendered, many parapsychologists lost interest, believing that research was premature at best, hopeless at worst (Stevenson, 1977). Interest shifted toward investigating extrasensory perception. Although small, several contributions to the near-death experience literature were made during this time. G. Murphy, a well-respected psychologist, wrote three noteworthy essays on the topic of surviving death. He claimed that, although much of the research to date had been inconclusive, it was still worthy of further investigation (Murphy, 1945a, 1945b, 1945c). Personal testimonies by celebrities gained near-death research some short-lived recognition. D. West sampled a small portion of the English population and found psi phenomena: 14% of the study had hallucinatory experiences and 9% reported seeing

apparitions of the dead (1948). A few studies involving clairvoyant abilities paralleled R. Moody's later findings regarding near-death experiences (Walker & Serdahely, 1990).

### Contemporary Near-death Studies

The years 1960 to the present have witnessed an explosion of research in near-death experiences. Today, near-death experiences are a common element in popular culture. Thousands have been documented. Books about near-death experiences have topped the New York Times Best Seller List. Numerous television specials have been devoted to the topic. Medical drama series on television are replete with mentions of near-death experiences. Daytime and late-night talk show hosts use near-death experiences in skits and casual conversation. The topic has gone "main stream" in that awareness of the concept is commonplace and acceptable.

This acceptance may be due, in part, to how common near-death experiences are in Western culture. In 1980, a Gallup survey showed that 5% of the United States population had had a near-death experience (Gallup, 1982). Using 2000 census figures, that translates to more than 14 million persons. Although an updated study has not been done, advances in life-sustaining technology, longer life spans, and a growing openness to the subject during the last 20 years suggest that this figure could possibly be much higher. Research shows that anywhere between 35% and 50% of the population has a near-death experience in their encounter with death (Moody, 1976; Ring, 1980; Gallup, 1982).

Moody broke open public and scientific interest in 1976 with his first study of near-death experiences. In *Life after Life*, he interviewed 150 people (50 intensively) in a phenomenological study to identify 15 common elements of a near-death experience.



These common elements were: (a) ineffability (having difficulty describing the experience in words); (b) hearing oneself pronounced dead; (c) a sensation of total peace and well-being; (d) a loud buzzing or ringing noise at the moment of death; (e) moving through a long, dark tunnel; (f) feeling that one's consciousness has been detached from the physical body, and/or viewing one's physical body as a spectator; (g) meeting spirits of loved ones and/or others previously known; (h) appearing before a "being of light" and/or being in the presence of this "being of light"; (i) undergoing a three-dimensional panoramic life review; (j) approaching a border or boundary, beyond which there is a world of intense beauty; (k) suddenly returning to one's physical body, sometimes being told that it was not one's time to die; (l) being reluctant or afraid to tell others; (m) undergoing value changes toward life; (n) experiencing a change in attitude toward death; and (o) corroboration of out-of-body events. He also defined a "core" or "deep" near-death experience. Noting that there were similarities in near-death experiences, Moody also cautioned that no one experienced all 15 elements and that no two near-death experiences were identical (1976).

Moody wrote a composite experience from his research that he identified as the core of a near-death experience:

A man is dying, and as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long, dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside of his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from this unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval. After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a "body," but one of a very different nature and with very different powers from his own physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind that he has never encountered before--a being of light--appears before him. This being asks him a question, nonverbally, to make

him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point he finds himself approaching a barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet, he finds that he must go back to earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point, he resists, for by now he is taken up with his experience in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives. Later he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still, the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life. (1975, pp. 21-22)

Osis conducted the first scientific study using modern survey methods and statistical evaluation in the study of death-related phenomena (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977). In 1977, the second follow-up study observed patients in the United States and India who described seeing visions while close to death. Of those dying patients who saw apparitions of the dead, 65% felt that these figures had come to aid them in the transition from life to death. The study also indicated that culture and religion affected visions of religious figures. Other studies seeking correlations between demographic factors such as gender, age, education, and socioeconomic status in relationship to specific aspects of patient apparitions show no significant relationships (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977).

Noyes is credited with reviving near-death studies. Near-death researcher K. Ring said that Noyes' article shifted research from parapsychological dominance to medical dominance in investigating near-death experiences. His work is an attempt to investigate the experience of dying using direct interviews of near-death survivors (Walker & Serdahely, 1990). He and fellow researcher R. Kletti were prominent (but not alone) in 1980 in advancing a "depersonalization" interpretation to explain reactions to the perception of impending death. Depersonalization is understood to be an ego-defensive

maneuver to insulate the individual from the harsh realities of imminent annihilation by providing a cocoon of compensatory fantasies and feelings. In stark contrast, Moody and E. Kübler-Ross, a well-known and respected psychiatrist and researcher with the terminally ill, put forward the “survival” hypothesis whereby consciousness survives the physical body (Ring, 1980).

Throughout the 1970s, Kübler-Ross spurred a great deal of public interest in the subject of near-death experiences. Her public lectures, workshops, and interviews almost single-handedly elevated public and professional awareness of near-death phenomena and their implications. Acknowledging this influence, Ring decried that:

Kübler-Ross now claims to have spoken to more than 1,000 men, women, and children about their near-death experiences, and on this basis she declares that she “knows for a fact there is life after death.” Although she has not published her findings in any systematic way . . . [her findings] lent a certain “scientific aura” to these accounts, which previously had been, in the eyes of many, merely the kind of unauthenticated testimony that appears regularly in such periodicals as the *National Enquirer* and *Reader’s Digest* . . . . [S]he has nowhere published them, and thus what the public record consists of are her summary descriptions and illustrative case histories--hardly a solid base for a scientific judgment of her material (1982, pp. 19-20).

Although she published no methodological accounts of the stories she heard from dying patients, her affirmation of near-death experiences created a receptive atmosphere with the public and research community (Ring, 1982). Kübler-Ross has since shifted her work, support, and activism to the indigent and children with AIDS at the Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Center in Virginia.

In 1977, the Association for the Scientific Study of Near-Death Phenomena was formed to stimulate scientific research into near-death experiences. Today, the organization, now known as the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), holds yearly conferences, sponsors regional support groups, publishes two

newsletters (one public and one research), and is in the process of developing a database of near-death-experience cases and a research referral system. In a 2000 letter to health care professionals, IANDS board member Jeffrey Long, M.D., and IANDS president Diane Corcoran, RN, Ph.D., define a near-death experience as “a lucid experience associated with perceived consciousness apart from the body occurring at the time of actual or threatened imminent death.” This last part is especially important. The fear of death, as well as death itself, appears to be sufficient enough to bring about a near-death experience (Stevenson, Cook, & McLean-Rice, 1990).

Ring’s 1980 landmark study, *Life at Death*, was the first book written from a scientific viewpoint. Of the 102 persons interviewed, 48% had had a near-death experience. He developed the Weighted Core Experience Index (WCEI) to examine and determine the depth of encounters. A core experience is defined as a sense of peace, entering the darkness, seeing the light, and entering the light. He looked at three causes of bodily trauma (illness, accidents, and suicide) and determined that near-death experiences occurred most often with victims of illness. A consistent aftereffect of near-death experiences is the reevaluation of core personal values (1980).

Sabom published a 1982 study titled, *Recollections of Death: A medical investigation*. A skeptical cardiologist and outspoken critic of the near-death experience concept, he interviewed 116 persons with medically documented near-death criteria. He found that 42% had had near-death experiences. He also found that medical interpretations alone could not explain away the reported experiences. His study also showed that demographics and type of life-threatening situations had no influence on incidence of near-death experience (1982).

Ring's 1984 follow-up study, *Heading toward Omega*, was based on 42 direct interviews and 174 responses to a written questionnaire. It identified aftereffects of near-death experiences as value changes that deepen love and concern for others; increased spirituality; decreased participation in formal religions; better self-image; decreased fear of death; increased acceptance of others; heightened quest for knowledge; increased sense of purpose in life; decreased concern for impressing others; and decreased desire to attain material things. He also noted that near-death experiencers might have problems readjusting. These are manifest with increasing probability as the Weighted Core Experience Index increases. Problems include increased depression; circle of intimates' inability to relate and tendency to discount the experiencer's claims; increased frustrations; and, perhaps of most interest, keeping quiet about the experience. Ring identified cultural, societal, and religious sources as reasons that near-death experiencers were reluctant to share their experience (1984).

P.H. Carr noted in her 1996 dissertation that Ring presented a composite description of a core near-death experience. She noted how strikingly similar Moody's and Ring's descriptions were, except for a different emphasis on who made the decision about coming back to the physical world. "The choice of whether or not to return to life in Ring's description is more often than not made by the person, whereas in Moody's description this decision seems to be outside the near-death experiencer's control" (p. 22). Both Moody and Ring expressed concerns for experiencers sharing their story. Both noted that experiencers feared they would be scoffed at, not believed, or ridiculed.

Early scientific attempts to explain the source of a near-death experience included stress-induced limbic lobe dysfunction, depersonalization, ego regression, Freudian reductionism, drug-induced hallucination, and birth recall models (Walker & Serdahely,

1990). Recent surgical advances have enabled physicians to place patients into a death state (no heartbeat, no brainwave activity, and no response to sound), perform complicated and dangerous surgery, and revive them successfully. Sabom describes one case study where a patient undergoing this procedure reported a profound near-death experience. Her out-of-body experience enabled her to give detailed accounts of surgical procedures and descriptions of the operating room, equipment, personnel, and conversations that could have been witnessed only from a conscious vantage point outside the body while under anesthesia. This fully documented procedure would seem to indicate the existence of an independent consciousness residing within the brain and capable of separating from the physical body (Sabom, 1998).

Two recent additions to the literature of near-death experiences are summary in nature, written for two completely different audiences, and filled with valuable information. Despite its tongue-in-cheek title and popular culture appeal, Atwater's book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Near-Death Experiences*, is a comprehensive summary of the current state of knowledge about near-death research. Written by one of the field's premier investigators, this tome covers all vital areas of knowledge about this subject. It has an extensive bibliography, but alas, no references or new research (Atwater & Morgan, 2000). Without references, it cannot be quoted. However, it is a noteworthy project and well done.

The second addition, *Lessons from the Light: What we can learn from the near-death experience*, by Kenneth Ring and Evelyn Elsaesser Valarino (1998) takes an unusual approach to the near-death genre. This is presumably Ring's last book on near-death experiences before retiring from a 30-year career devoted to the phenomenon at the University of Connecticut. In it, Ring updates the reader on various aspects of near-death

research and invites the reader to benefit from the stories and lessons learned from near-death experiencers. Because this work is, in part, the latest summary of near-death research by the foremost researcher in the field, I devote more space to it than to other publications mentioned previously in this literature review. His approach of using long excerpts from interviews and then inviting the reader to empathetically enter these stories partly influenced the format chosen for this dissertation.

Ring starts his book by reestablishing the common elements of a near-death experience mentioned in his prior works, *Life at Death* (1980), *The Omega Project* (1992), and *Heading toward Omega* (1984). He reaffirms that a near-death experience is a mixed blessing offering wonderful insights and the deepest challenges. He notes that most near-death experiencers have to work hard to unwrap and incorporate the gifts of their experience. These gifts, the aftereffects of a near-death experience, have far-reaching impacts:

Long-time standing relationships [are] strained to and beyond the breaking point, marriages collapse, misunderstandings are common, and periods of painful introspection and even depression are not rare. The near-death experience tends to turn a person's life topsy-turvy and the radical reorientation and personal courage to live out the truth of one's near-death experience may be very taxing indeed, both to the near-death experiencer and his or her family and friends. (Lessons from the Light, 1998, p. 33)

He notes that, although the benefits and ideals of near-death experiences are accorded nominal approval by many in our society, they are often undermined in practice. "The near-death experience is a subversive phenomenon in the sense that it undercuts the crasser forms of the American Dream" (p. 34). The aftereffects are consistent, and studies show that "whatever the nature of the near-death experience, it is real in its effects" (p. 124). Ring also establishes that quite a few persons have no conscious recall of a near-

death experience. Sometimes the memories are recovered, sometimes not, but the effects are real.

He divides the insights gained from a near-death experience into three levels: beatific vision, the universal aspect of the near-death experience; earthly realizations, where the importance of certain human values, beliefs, and strivings informs one's life; and personal revelation, where the lessons are personalized. In describing the working of personal revelations, Ring informs us that the Light can be seen as constructing an experience particularized for the needs and circumstances of the near-death experiencer. He defines the Light as a healing force that can strip away the "false self" that is socially constructed to reveal the authentic self (p. 52).

Ring explains why conversation about near-death experiences has shifted toward the survivor hypothesis. With a nod to researcher S. Blackmore, skeptic and author of *Dying to Live: Science and the near-death experience* (1996), he states that an explanation of near-death experiences on neurological grounds is useful but ultimately misdirected (Ring & Valarino, 1998). He rebuffs this neurological argument by establishing the groundwork for the scientific basis of near-death experiences as being real. He focuses on case studies in which experiencers were able to discover during an out-of-body state information about their physical surroundings that could not have been possible given their location and medical status. Further veridicality studies of witnesses have corroborated these accounts. Ring also describes his newly completed study with Sharon Cooper on experiencers who are blind (Ring & Cooper, 1999). In the study of 31 persons (14 blind since birth), 21 had a near-death experience that fit the classic pattern. Ten had out-of-body states. Of the 31 persons, 80% "saw" both the physical and non-physical worlds. Their vision was clear and contained accurate, corroborated descriptions



of places and events. Ring acknowledges the language problem that non-sighted persons have in relating things and events that they have never experienced. He explains the multifaceted synesthetic aspect of the experiencers' perceptions (sight that contains within it other sensations, such as touch) and calls this newly articulated transcendental awareness "mindsight" (p.93).

He summarizes research on children who have had a near-death experience. Of particular interest is his work with very young children, ages 3 and under, because they had their near-death experiences before the influence of popular and religious culture could impinge on their worldview. He found youthful memory to be accurate and the stories compelling, even if recalled in later life. Their experiences paralleled near-death experiences of both older children and adults. Some even recalled perinatal memory. Ring felt they were describing something that is intrinsic to the human personality.

In addition to exploring the psychological and behavioral changes following a near-death experience, Ring elaborates on the resulting changes in consciousness and paranormal functioning, including expanded mental awareness, paranormal sensitivities, and healing gifts. He converts physiological and neurological changes such as hyperesthesia (unusual sensitivity to light, sound, humidity, drugs, allergies, electricity, and other environmental stimuli or conditions), states of physiological hypoarousal, energetic shifts and kundalini activation, and neurological and brain changes.

The healing nature of the near-death experience is due in large part to the past-life review. The experiencer does not merely review significant moments in his or her life, but actually relives the entire life, experiencing all its fullness of emotion and thought. This reliving process often has a hard-to-describe, dual nature. Near-death experiencers experience the past-life review all at once and chronologically, too. This dual nature

happens because time is spatialized, meaning that time is deployed in space in a holographic domain. Experiencers often see events as existing in bubbles or across a series of movie screens. Near-death experiencers take an active role in the process of understanding what their lives have been about. This means that they can re-experience their life from not only their own perspective, but also that of others in the scene. Some even experience life from the perspective of all those who have been affected by their actions. In this way, the experiencers realize that all acts are recorded. They become fully and intimately aware of the ripple affect. Near-death experiencer Neev said, “I would feel all the emotions, pain, and suffering of all of the characters around me in the play” (Ring, p. 155). Ring then noted, “This dual perspective obviously allows for both detached observation and emotional involvement during the life review, so that the individual can learn in different but complementary ways over the course of the experience” (p. 155). In addition, experiencers often have the ability to pause the review or change perspectives, depending on their needs.

Near-death experiencers seem always to be accompanied by an entity whose job it is to give guidance and comfort. Any judging done during the near-death experience is by the experiencer. The guide may offer suggestions on how a scene might have been handled differently so that the experiencer can learn. The guide’s primary role is to love and support the experiencer throughout the process so that the experiencer can be, without guilt, an objective, clear-eyed judge of self. In its essence, the life review is educative in nature. It is designed to be a teaching tool and, thus, a tool for living.

Of considerable weight is the realization that humans are part of an interconnected whole. “The life review shows [the experiencer an] intricate web of wholeness of which [they] are indelibly a part. [It] then becomes [their] world and serves as the experiential

basis of [their] ethics” (Ring, p. 177). Ring indicates that, because of this interconnection, what we do to others and our physical world we literally do to ourselves. The world of separation is an illusion. We are one with God and the universe.

Another lesson learned from the near-death experience is that there is but one thing in the universe--love. This unwavering love means that we cannot be separated from it, no matter what our actions. We are loved, forgiven, and embraced by it at all times. This lesson has dramatic effects on near-death experiencers. Self-acceptance and self-compassion help increase an individual’s self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence. By dropping judgments against others and ourselves, we are free to fully accept and express our true trusting and loving, authentic selves. Implicit in this freedom is the need for courage to pursue these newfound strengths. Most will seek this courage; some will cower from the transition toward a new self.

By fully understanding that life does not end with physical death and that death is an illusion of separateness and finality, experiencers lose all fear of death. (Most still respect the process and pain of dying.) This loss speaks to those contemplating suicide because it is impossible to die; there is only life. Most start living differently because of this knowledge. Many choose to spread the news that there is only life, and everything is made from God’s love. Those around them are affected by what they see modeled by near-death experiencers. In fact, preliminary studies indicate that the belief in life after death increases in those exposed (via conversation, books, films, etc.) to the nature of near-death experiences.

In summary, Ring’s message is that near-death experiences teach people about how to be. Experiencers “learn how to live, live better with self-awareness, self-compassion, and concern for others. Live well, and death will take care of itself” (Ring &

Valarino, 1998, p. 282). By living well, Ring conjectures that we write the script that will govern our souls' posthumous journey. As its author, we take responsibility for our own lives. Our assignment is to love; all we take from this human experience is love and knowledge.

### Personal Accounts

Numerous historical and contemporary figures have given personal testimony about the nature of near-death experiences. Carl Jung, Thomas Edison, Benjamin Franklin, Elizabeth Browning, Eddie Richenbacher, Louisa May Alcott, and Ernest Hemingway have contributed. In *Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway is believed to have written about his experiences as an ambulance driver in World War I. Having been severely wounded, he was thought dead and was revived to tell of his near-death experience. Likewise, whether based on personal experience or not, tales in English literature abound with near-death themes. William Shakespeare, Leo Tolstoy, Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Dickens, Thornton Wilder, Victor Hugo, and Katherine Anne Porter all added to this genre (Walker & Serdahely, 1990).

Recent popular autobiographical accounts include Barbara Harris's *Full Circle*, Betty Eadie's *Embraced by the Light*, and Dannion Brinkley's *Saved by the Light*. These authors have become enormously popular and continue to cultivate public interest in near-death experiences with books, seminars, and television appearances.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Research Design and Methodology: The Seeker Meets Academia

“My scientific investigation was forgotten or was at least redirected into channels that were worlds apart from my original intention.”

--*Carlos Castaneda*

This paper is an autobiographical ethnography. It is the story of my understanding of the nature of humankind and the physical and non-physical universes. It wasn't always that way. The study was originally designed and conducted as a phenomenological inquiry. This approach seemed to fit best the complexity of the near-death experience, the constraints imposed by society on disclosure, the state of current knowledge about near-death experiences, and my knowledge base. When writing the results, I realized that the phenomenological approach was inadequate because it failed to recognize my role as participant observer. Because the research was conducted within phenomenological context and some of the analysis still retains that flavor, a brief review of this style is in order. This is followed by an explanation of the circumstances and reasons for the change to autobiographical ethnography.

Phenomenology seeks to understand the perspective people construct as a way of looking at the world. Literature indicates that near-death experiences radically alter what participants deem as important in life and what makes the world work. Both subjects are at the heart of phenomenological inquiry.

Near-death experiences throw ordinary people into a non-ordinary world of events and experiences. After the encounter, people return to their ordinary, physical world to

try to understand what they encountered in the non-physical universe. The phenomenological mode of inquiry attempts to shed light on this struggle for meaning. This method also recognizes that the information coming from the subject is subjective and open to multiple ways of interpretation. It is this striving for the meaning of the near-death experience that constitutes the new reality of the survivor. The goal of phenomenology is to understand the subjects and their new reality from their point of view.

Because most of the population have neither had a near-death experience nor have one readily available to them, researchers often rely on phenomenological inquiry to gain entry into the conceptual world of the subject. This method is used to understand what meaning they attach to events occurring during the near-death experience. Subjects are the experts on their own experience and perception. Phenomenology recognizes this and gives it voice. Prediction and control are unlikely outcomes; instead the understanding of observed phenomena is sought (Manahan, 1991).

In phenomenology, researchers may not assume that they know what things mean to people they are studying. I have not had a "classic" near-death experience and therefore benefit from this assumption. Although not perfect, phenomenology is less likely to distort the subjects' experience than are quantitative approaches (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

#### Background: Symbolic Interactionism Principles of Investigation

I initially used Symbolic Interactionism to analyze and present the collected data. Because some of the data in Chapters 8 and 9 still retain this character, it is helpful to note the principles underpinning this method. Symbolic Interactionists approach their

subjects differently than most social scientists. Instead of assuming a mechanistic model of investigation, they use something closer to cultural anthropology. This method makes note of persons talking and acting out their everyday lives. Symbolic Interactionism revolves around five ideas: social interaction, interactions with self, definition of the situation, cause in the present, and the active relationship humans have with their environment. The Symbolic Interactionism method requires the following principles of investigation:

1. The central principle is that we can understand what is going on only if we understand what the actors themselves believe about their world.
2. Symbolic Interactionists believe that it is important to gather data through observing people in real situations.
3. Participant observation and interviewing actors are two techniques used to understand the perspectives of groups of actors.
4. Personal accounts and life histories are two attempts to capture the perspectives of individual actors.
5. Symbolic Interactionists are critical of traditional social science, its use of scientific methodology for the study of human beings, and its definition of “important causal variables.”
6. The Symbolic Interactionist regards a careful description of human interaction to be a central goal of social science.
7. Two modes of inquiry should be used to describe the real world: exploration and inspection. Exploration is using any ethical procedure that aids in understanding “what’s going on around here.” Inspection, the second step, involves

isolating important elements within the situation and describing the situation in relation to those elements.

8. The Symbolic Interactionist in studying the human being believes it is very important to move from mechanical models of causation to processual models (Charon, 1998).

### A Theoretical Framework: Ethnography

The first several drafts of this dissertation reflected the use of phenomenological inquiry and symbolic interactionism analysis and presentation. I categorized and analyzed themes, seeking to understand how experiencers created meaning from their near-death experiences. I endeavored to create and facilitate an academic and objective knowledge of near-death experiences. However, the harder I worked, the more muddled my writing became. After a series of frustrating rewrites, I met with my dissertation committee chair, Dr. Bruce Kramer. He opened the meeting in a way that made me tense up. “Was writing this last chapter difficult?” he asked. I responded affirmatively. I told him that I was having trouble capturing the complexity of my findings. He nodded appreciatively and asked if he could read something to me. He picked up my chapter and read a page of what I’d written. “What do you think of what you wrote?” he asked. It happened to be a section of which I was most proud, for it captured beautifully the essence of what I had been trying to say. “Did your experiencers tell you this?” he pressed. I responded, “Yes and no. Yes, from the standpoint that, after 25 interviews, bits and pieces of that analysis were in almost all interviews. No, from the standpoint that no one experiencer labeled my conclusion and spelled it out directly.” I went on to say that I felt that it was my job as researcher to pull together the hidden, implied structure and give it a voice. “Thank you,”



Dr. Kramer said. “When I read this last piece, you were all over the data. Your interpretation was such that it was hard to separate what the experiencers were telling you and what you were inferring from their stories. That writing style is not consistent with Symbolic Interactionism. There needs to be more distance between you and the presentation of your data.” I was ambivalent. Both of us liked the insights I drew from the data, but I now needed to change gears to find an approach that would work for both the data and scholarly appropriateness. I realized then that it was my understanding of the data, my understanding of reality, that needed to be the primary object of this study. The real story was my journey of understanding.

Fortunately, Dr. Donald LaMagdeleine, University of St. Thomas educational leadership’s resident sociologist and a member of my committee, suggested an approach pioneered by Carlos Castaneda in his book, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui way of knowledge* (1968). In 1960, Castaneda was an anthropology student at the University of California, Los Angeles. During one of several trips to the Southwest to collect information about the medicinal plants used by the Indians of the area, he was introduced to don Juan, an Indian learned about plants, especially peyote. Don Juan indicated that the only way Castaneda was going to learn about these medicinal plants was to become his apprentice and discover a way of knowledge don Juan and the plants would impart to him. They both agreed to this arrangement and to the “very deep commitment . . . [for] the training was long and arduous” (p. 14).

In a telling portion of his introduction, Castaneda describes the research process that almost exactly parallels my own:

Several months after my withdrawal, I considered for the first time the idea of arranging my field notes in a systematic way. As the data I had collected were quite voluminous, and included much miscellaneous information, I began by

trying to establish a classification system. I divided the data into areas of related concepts and procedures and arranged the areas hierarchically according to subjective importance--that is, in terms of the impact that each of them had had on me. In that way I arrived at the following classification: uses of hallucinogenic plants; procedures and formulas used in sorcery; acquisition and manipulation of power objects; uses of medicinal plants; songs and legends.

Reflecting upon the phenomena I had experienced, I realized that my attempt at classification had produced nothing more than an inventory of categories; any attempt to refine my scheme would therefore yield only a more complex inventory. That was not what I wanted. During the months following my withdrawal from apprenticeship, I needed to understand what I had experienced, and what I had experienced was the teaching of a coherent system of beliefs by means of a pragmatic and experimental method. It had been evident to me from the very first session in which I had participated that don Juan's teachings possessed an internal cohesion . . . . To discover that order and to understand it proved to be a most difficult task. (pp. 19-20)

I too first divided my data into eight categories (metathemes) with 124 subcategories (themes). I shifted them around, looked at them through multiple lenses, and created different categories in an effort to describe what I was discovering. I summarized my findings, but they didn't reflect what I was feeling. There was disquiet about my approach and this system of classification. The interviews had deeply moved me, but that emotional change was absent in any inventory of themes. There was more to be captured, but it remained beyond articulation. What was beginning to emerge was that the near-death experiences, and the experiencers' reactions to them, were symptoms of a deeper order. Somewhere in the multiple stories was a system that governed both the physical and non-physical universe, the expression of which would explain both the event and the aftereffects. Somewhere in those stories was an internal cohesion that explained who we are and why the worlds work in the way they do.

Castaneda's book is arranged in two sections. In section one, he uses a first-person narrative to describe the events and teachings imparted by don Juan and the plants. He calls these "The Teachings." They represent excerpts from his field notes

describing the states of nonordinary reality he underwent during his apprenticeship and his conversations with don Juan. These notes disclose the subjective version of what he perceived while undergoing the experience. His expressed intention is to reflect accurately the overall mood of the exchanges with both the plants and don Juan. The first three-quarters of his book are devoted to presenting the events and dialogue upon which he bases his analysis. No attempt is made to analyze, rather to record what was happening at the time and his immediate reactions to it.

Section two, Castaneda's "Structural Analysis," describes what he abstracted from the data on the states of non-ordinary reality. It consists of two parts, conceptual and operational. These parallel my analysis in which unity forms the conceptual analysis and freedom the operational analysis. The structural analysis is Castaneda's attempt to disclose the internal cohesion and the cogency of don Juan's teachings. The structural analysis details the logical sequence that enabled him to view the entire phenomenon in an objective light that dispelled the sense of bizarreness that was the hallmark of all he had experienced (p. 238). His analysis supported the following themes: (a) don Juan presented his teaching as a system of logical thought; (b) the system made sense only if examined in the light of its structural units; and (c) the system was devised to guide an apprentice to a level of conceptualization, which explained the order of the phenomena he had experienced (pp. 26-27).

This dissertation uses a similar format. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 represent "The Teachings"--condensed interviews with four persons who imparted great wisdom to me. Each is considered, borrowing Castaneda's method, as a plant or a "man of knowledge." The original interviews were considerably longer than what is presented here. I retained only that which has direct bearing on the near-death experience, plus enough background

material to place the interview in context. The order and language of the interviews have been changed somewhat to facilitate comprehension. Chapters 8 and 9 present the structural analysis; Chapter 8 focuses on the conceptual theme of unity, Chapter 9 on the operational theme of freedom. Chapter 10 reflects my journey. It represents my point of reference at the time of the interviews, the evolution of my understanding of these themes, and the resulting personal implications.

Castaneda learned about nonordinary reality and became a “man of knowledge” through sessions with the plants and follow-up conversations with don Juan in an effort to make sense of his experience. Interviews with my wise informants are similar to Castaneda’s sessions with his plants. Each imparted knowledge of non-ordinary reality. Castaneda explains:

Because this conceptual structure is completely dependent on the meaning of all its units, the following clarification seems to be pertinent at this point: Throughout this entire work, meaning has been rendered as I understood it. The component concepts of don Juan’s knowledge as I have presented them here could not be the exact duplicate of what he said himself. In spite of all the effort I have put forth to render these concepts as faithfully as possible, their meaning has been deflected by my own attempts to classify them . . . . But insofar as the component ideas of each main unit are concerned, it has been impossible to discard my personal influence. And, if such a task was to be accomplished here, it had to be done by zigzagging back and forth from the alleged meanings and classificatory scheme of the teacher to the meanings and classificatory devices of the apprentice. (pp. 189-190)

A zigzagging pattern is evident in the presentation of my data as well. The stories and quotes from the interviews are interwoven with my interpretation of the data. My attempt is to weave the individual bits of data into a tapestry that, when taken as a whole, creates a systematic and coherent pattern.

This pattern is entirely my own. I have tried to render the meaning, both explicit and implied, accurately and faithfully from the data culled from interviews. Like

Castaneda, it has been impossible to discard my personal influence. The sensitivity and perspective I gained from my own near-death-like experience put me in a unique position to both understand and revisit the near-death experience realm when experiencers relived it during their interviews. The best information emerged when I allowed myself to sensate in communion with the interviewee, intuiting my next question and response. I had not anticipated this development when first designing the study. As participant observer, my unique position became critically important to my understanding of the information imparted to me. It was impossible to step back from what I knew and present it objectively.

Four chapters, featuring one participant each, correspond to Castaneda's description of events and apply Ring's approach of using long excerpts into which the reader is invited to enter empathetically. This is done so that the reader will have an opportunity to experience multiple ways of knowing. In the chapters on unity and freedom, readers again are invited to immerse themselves in short passages or phrases that have a particularly rich sensate quality. My hope is that the reader will try this experiential approach in order to feel the description and experience cross-sensation (smell freedom) more fully. These ways of knowing allow a fuller understanding of the complexity contained within the near-death experience and allow the reader to begin to touch the ineffable.

## Research Design

### *Study setting*

The study was set in southern and central Minnesota. The communities represented were Mankato and the greater metropolitan area of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

These communities were selected because of their proximity to regional medical treatment centers. I assumed, correctly, that they contained a high concentration of persons who had had a near-death experience.

### *Selection of subjects*

The subjects in this inquiry were chosen not because of their "representativeness" but because of their uniqueness (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). I sought a wide range of stories, 23 in all, to adequately capture the multiple dimensions of a near-death experience.

### *Criteria*

My first selection qualification was that interviewees identified themselves as having undergone a near-death experience. The definition of near-death experience was, then, a self-definition. This appellation was taken seriously; each person underwent a traumatic and life-changing event in order to self-qualify. Second, I asked each participant to certify his or her near-death-experience status by assembling corroborative documentation (hospital records, nurses' notes, physical evidence) showing that the medical conditions for a near-death experience were indeed present at the time of their near-death experience. I used these to authenticate their experience or clarify information given in the interview. Third, I asked for permission to contact other individuals who would be willing to corroborate the experience of the subject and give additional insight into the changes they went through.

The following attributes were then used to select participants.

1. Degree of experience. A near-death experience may contain many components: a sense of being dead, peace and painlessness, an out-of-body experience, a tunnel experience, people of light, being of the Light, a life review, a reluctance to return,

and a personality transformation. Early research indicates that a "core experience" yields the most information (Moody & Perry, 1992). However, Ring's "Weighted Core Experience Index" (1980) was not considered relevant to this study because it did not give proper consideration to persons who had short but significant experiences (Atwater personal communication, July 27, 1999). Later research confirmed that being exposed to or entering into the Light was the only requisite variable (Moody & Perry, 1992; Atwater, 1988). I sought persons using this single experience criterion.

2. Willingness to share. To secure the needed information, I looked for an attitude of cooperation and willingness to share the experience.

3. Ability to recall and articulate the experience. The near-death experience is difficult to describe. Those interviewed had to be able to describe the experience in both gross and subtle dimensions.

4. Time away from the experience. The ability to look back and put the near-death experience in perspective was desirable. I selected subjects who were two or more years away from their near-death experience.

5. Light encounter. The difference between a mystical experience and a near-death experience is that near-death experiencers had an experience with the phenomena of Light. The Light transformed these individuals, and this transformative quality was of primary interest to me. Experiencers of near-death and near-death-like states described the Light in terms that suggested that there were three very different types of Light:

- a. Primary Light is colorless. Its pulsating presence or luminosity usually is perceived as frighteningly awesome, a piercing power, raw essence, or the origin of all origins.

b. Dark Light is pure black, yet often with velvety tinges of dark purple. Its shimmering peaceful depth usually is perceived as "The Darkness That Knows," a source of strength and knowing, sanctuary, or the womb of creation.

c. The Bright Light is in the range of yellow-gold-white. Its brilliant radiance usually is perceived as an almost blinding glow that emanates unconditional love, a warm inviting intelligence, union, and the activity of Truth.

"Each of these three lights are consistently referred to in the literature, regardless of person, age, or background, as more real than the manifest light on earth and more powerful than any source humankind could harness--including the sun's rays and 'zero-point' energy (the 'stuff' of the universe; untapped electromagnetic energy)" (Atwater, 1988, p. 1).

6. Culture. This study was open to persons from all cultures.

7. Gender. I attempted to balance genders for this study. However, as with previous studies, recruiting males was problematic. Males seemed less willing to share their experiences. In addition, women were more likely to qualify due to the number of near-death experiences that occur during childbirth. (See Appendix A for details on the final composition of participants.)

8. Age. Persons selected for this study needed to be adults when they encountered their near-death experience. I preferred adults because they would have had a more stable sense of self before their near-death experience and would have been able to accurately remember the impact the experience had on their life. Although recent research on children showed that they exhibit near-death experience patterns similar to those of adults (with the exception of no life review and no altered sense of time), their sense of self and ability to articulate the subtle differences between before and after the



encounter were problematic (Walker & Serdahely, 1990). Therefore, persons younger than the age of 15 at the time of their near-death experience were not included.

9. Not relevant. Employment, financial status, level of education, and race had no bearing on the type of experience near-death experiencers encounter (Atwater, 1988) and were not considered.

Each prospective candidate was ranked on an intake form. (See Appendix B for a sample of the intake form.) This helped narrow the possible pool of applicants to those who met the above criteria. The criteria were necessary to screen out individuals who misunderstood the definition of a near-death experience, may have been hallucinating at the time, or were inclined to tell a fictional story.

### *Participants for the Study*

I interviewed 23 near-death experiencers for this study. These participants were recruited from four sources:

1. Referrals from medical or counseling personnel in the geographic areas mentioned
2. Private or public speaking engagements where I described my research and asked for volunteers
3. Referrals from friends and colleagues
4. Advertisements placed in the *Home* magazine, a Mankato-based free paper, and the Open U course bulletin, which is distributed widely in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area. The advertisements ran during January 1999. (See Appendix C for a sample of the advertisement.) A note to future researchers: Using this method, at the end of four weeks I had more requests to participate in the study than I could possibly use. Methods 1 through 3 produced few responses.

All experiencers came to this study of their own volition. I did not solicit individuals directly. First contact was made by phone when experiencers called me. At that time, I asked them screening questions to determine if they met the criteria. If they met the criteria, I informed them of the confidentiality of the interviews, the need for them to sign a consent form, and my intention to tape-record the interview. That being satisfactory, we arranged for a mutually agreed-upon site for our conversation. Some wanted to see the consent form ahead of time; it was mailed to them directly. (See Appendix D for a sample consent form.)

In April 1999, I mailed a letter to each experiencer updating them on my progress and advising them of the availability of counseling help should the interview bring up issues they wished to deal with professionally. I also asked them to keep me current on addresses and phone numbers so I could follow up as necessary. (See Appendix E for a copy of the update letter.)

### *Interview Format*

Data were collected through in-depth interviews using the phenomenological interviewing approach. Personal interviews were selected over other data collection techniques (mail or phone surveys) for a number of reasons. Face-to-face interviews permitted me to uncover dimensions of human functioning and development not revealed by less personal techniques. They also enabled me to gather large amounts of data from a small group of respondents, establish rapport with the respondent, probe for more complete data, gain confidential and unanticipated additional information, and gain insights into feelings of the respondent through observing gestures and tone of voice. Additionally, interviews allow for flexibility and adaptability (Udinsky, Osterlind, & Lynch, 1981; Manahan, 1991). I explored general topics to help uncover participants'

meanings and perspectives, but otherwise tailored my questions to the way participants framed and structured their responses (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Phenomenological interviewing methods allowed me to study experiences and how these experiences are put together to develop a worldview. This inquiry method carries an assumption that a "structure and essence" to shared experiences can be determined (Patton in Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 82). During my first attempt at this research, I endeavored to encompass the three stages of phenomenological interviewing--epoch, phenomenological reduction, and structural syntheses (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). During epoch, the researcher examines self to identify personal biases and attempts to remove all traces of personal involvement in the phenomena being studied. Phenomenological reduction occurs when the researcher brackets the rest of the world and any presuppositions with which he approaches the subject. Data are then clustered around invariant themes. Structural synthesis involves the articulation of the "bones" of the experience of the phenomenon and the description of its deep structure (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

#### *Interview Schedule*

Interviews were conducted between September 1998 and April 1999. Most interviews were done in one sitting, with the opportunity to conduct a follow-up interview by phone or in person, if needed. During the initial interview, I tried to draw out the dynamics of the experience and as many interpretations as were comfortable. Any second (also subsequent) interviews were used to explore information gleaned from the transcripts and to clear up ambiguous concepts and language. Subsequent interviews generally yielded valuable additional information due to the trust and rapport that existed between the participant and me.

### *Interview Process*

The interview process was designed to give voice to both the outer and inner dimensions of the near-death experience. For some participants, the whole topic of near-death experiences was subjugated knowledge, not legitimized by friends, relatives, colleagues, or society. In other cases, the experience and its concomitant meaning were submerged; careful, prolonged questioning was necessary to draw out their story. The very nature of the non-physical world we were exploring sometimes led to indefiniteness, multiple perspectives, complex interrelationships within the non-physical world--or between the non-physical and physical worlds, and contradictions that could not be resolved. These relationships were affirmed as a necessary part of the discovery process.

My questions were open-ended. I chose this approach because it allowed me to be flexible and responsive to the individual experiencer. Questions were individualized, which increased the rapport and immediacy of the interview questions and responses (Patton in Marshall & Rossman, 1995). I developed guiding questions that allowed us to cover essentially the same material and helped remind the interviewer of possible additional areas of comment. (See Appendix F for the list of guiding questions.)

### *Data Collection*

The interviews took place in quiet, comfortable locations, most often at the participant's home, where interruptions could be kept to a minimum. When that option was uncomfortable or inconvenient, we met in a public library meeting room. In one case, I reluctantly agreed to use the back booth at a fast-food restaurant because it was the experiencer's favorite coffee stop. Comfortable locations allowed me to pay special attention to the disclosure needs of the subject. That was important because the quantity

and quality of information obtained in an interview are linked to the disclosure need of the individual (Hoffman, 1995).

At the beginning of each interview, I welcomed the experiencer and reminded him or her of the nature of the research and its confidentiality. Participants had an opportunity to read and sign the consent form. I answered any questions they had about how the time of the interview was to be spent. I also requested that they delay any questions about my near-death-like experience until the end of the interview so as not to bias their answers. I reminded them about the necessity for tape-recording and explained how it would be used. I then asked them to describe the situation in which they found themselves at the time of their near-death experience. I asked that they describe both their outer events and inner thoughts. After this, I asked them to continue right on describing their near-death experience in as much detail as possible and promised to resist interrupting them until they finished. I told them I would take notes on what they were saying so that we could go back and explore subjects that were interesting or needed clarification.

At the end of their narrative, I thanked them for sharing their story. Then, using their own words, I asked them to give me more details about certain subjects. When this was completed, I broached subjects of interest that were not covered during the initial monologue. At all times, I tried to keep the tone of the interview as that of a comfortable conversation between friends. This approach worked well in establishing rapport and trust.

The interviews averaged 90 minutes in length. At the conclusion of the interview, personal data, such as the subject's age, educational attainment, and occupation, were collected. Sometimes the experiencer wanted to know about my experience, a request

which I gladly obliged. The entire time we spent together was tape-recorded for later analysis. I used a Sony TCM-59V auto-reverse "cassette-corder." This recorder is designed for interviews and has microphone sensitivity especially suited to the human voice.

The literature consistently describes the near-death experience as having an ineffable quality that may, in part, be captured by body movements, how the subject takes up space, and other non-verbal communication. This was captured in my field notes, both during and after the interview. In interviews with near-death researcher Atwater, she discouraged the use of video recorders to capture this information. She felt that experiencers' behaviors changed too dramatically with the addition of video equipment into the interview setting (personal communication, July 27, 1999).

Following each interview, the audiotape was transcribed into a computer using Word 97/2000. Each transcript was checked against the source audiotape for accuracy. The transcript was then checked against the field notes for accuracy and inclusiveness of the observer comments.

Some interviews were transcribed by professional typists, others by me. Those that I typed were prepared immediately afterward to preserve the feeling and texture of the interview. I added observer comments at the time of transcription. For those prepared by professional typists, the observer comments were added when the interview tape was checked against the transcript for accuracy.

The tape-recorder was placed between the participant and me, on a low table, for ease of use and for good voice recording. This distance was sometimes necessary due to the disruptive electromagnetic fields given off by some near-death experiencers. Amplified electromagnetic fields defeat electronic devices (Moody & Perry, 1992).

Ninety-minute cassette tapes (45 minutes per side) were used. This length matched the anticipated interview time and provided the "thickness" needed to avoid entanglement in the recorder. Extra tapes and batteries were available in case the participant was "on a roll" and wanted to continue the interview past 90 minutes. One interview lasted four hours.

The strengths of using a tape-recorder are obvious: It provided an accurate version of the interview, enabled interpretations of nuances, allowed data to be analyzed many times, and provided a permanent record. Weaknesses are equally apparent: It may be subject to breakdown, it could be distracting, and it can influence people's behavior.

All of the mechanical arrangements were explained to the subject prior to our interview. I reinforced the necessity of each of the components and reminded experiencers of the nature of our agreement on how the information gathered would be used.

After the interviews were completed and data analyzed, I created a written document and mailed it back to the interviewees with a self-addressed stamped envelope for comments. (See Appendix G for the comment letter.) The objective of checking in with participants was to confirm that the themes developed from the data made sense to them. The same results were shared with colleagues in several formats (one-on-one, presentations and idea exchanges at conferences, and written correspondence) for debriefing and reactions. In addition, presentations were made through adult education programs at churches and book groups. These were done to "test drive" my findings and clarify my thinking as a result of questions I received.

### *Data Analysis*

I analyzed each interview for content themes. This process took place in stages. During multiple, careful readings, I identified and coded 165 separate subject areas. These subject areas were then grouped into six broad categories: a new way of being--positive (36), a new way of being--negative (37), loss of boundaries (52), healing (9), freedom (21), and my experiences as an interviewer (10). I matched these themes against the research question, "How do they live with what they know?" The results were found wanting. What I had seemed like a compartmentalization of ideas explored in numerous previous studies. I reorganized the 165 subject areas into six metathemes that were more consistent with the research question: The near-death experience, experiencers get what they need, how we are to live, life and rules in the near-death experience, aftereffects, and the nature of God. At this point, I selected the most important subject areas, "the bones," within the six metathemes and discarded the rest. I identified quotes that represented the complexity of each subject area. Some subject areas were highly consistent, some highly divergent, and others a wonderful mixture of subtle variations on a theme. I also highlighted quotes that conveyed a special energy or power to relate the message of the experiencer. Finally, I further refined quotes with each subject area to reflect both expressed and ineffable experiences.

### **The Researcher: Beliefs and Biases**

I came to this study with the belief that we have moved beyond the "mind is in the brain" framework of consciousness. A substantial number of studies concerning near-death and out-of-body experiences have detailed a vast amount of experiences where fully functional consciousness resided outside of the physical body. I believe that near-



death experiencers encounter a real topography in the non-physical universe that can be described accurately and duplicated by others having a near-death experience.

Similarities of near-death experiences across age, religion, culture, and gender tend to validate this as a "real" experience. As real experiences existing in a real universe, these events have the ability to teach us something about the values and relationships inherent in our transcendent universe.

I also came to this study as a believer in God. The concept of a divine being that I learned growing up in the Presbyterian tradition surely had an impact on my interpretation of events. Yet, I also believe that my experience in Nolan's hospital room would have forced me to create the concept of a divine presence even if one had not been taught to me at a young age.

#### Protection of Participants

The treatment of subjects was conducted in a manner consistent with the protection of the well-being, dignity, and rights of each research participant. Subjects were not exposed to any physical risk. Psychological risk was limited to sharing an experience that likely was both profound and traumatic. Participation in the study was informed, voluntary, and confidential. No vulnerable population groups were used. This research fairly distributed both minimal risks and benefits among ethnic, racial, religious, sexual, and/or age-defined classes. The University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board approved the study.

The actual names of the participants were not revealed in this dissertation. Locations were fabricated to avoid any potentially harmful effects associated with revealing the identity of the participants in the interviews. This protection extended, as

well, to anyone interviewed to corroborate any of the facts deriving from the interviews, including parents, spouses, children, medical personnel, or friends of the near-death experiencers. Where providing specific dates would have served to reveal the identity of the participants, dates were changed for specified events. Participants were informed of this anonymity at the time of scheduling and at the interviews.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Martha

“I felt connected. I then understood that I was there to learn.  
To see how everything and everyone is part of everything else.”

*-Martha*

I didn't know what I was in for when she called me. Much of Martha seemed so ordinary. She was a middle-aged white woman with health problems living alone in a trailer park. Yet, I came to discover many surprising things about her. The surprise came because out of a normal and predictable appearance came nonordinary wisdom and insight. In a very real sense, Martha introduced me to the near-death experience. You will discover, as I did, that Martha's experience was wide-ranging and complex. Her insights were delivered simply and in a way that challenged and made real what I know about how the world works. Martha is the first of four wise ones that I use to demonstrate the changing nature of my understanding. Each one holds for me a major piece of the puzzle that contributed to the discovery of my beliefs. Taken as a whole, the four wise ones got to me. These four participants awakened insights and changed the way I looked at the world. If each knew ahead of time his or her role in the play of this adventure of understanding and if each had the precognitive insight to recognize the direction our interview would take us, I believe Martha might have told me:

Scott, once you enter into our interview about my near-death experience you are going to see a lot of things and I'm going to describe many of them. I do this so that when you see them again, you will feel that you have already seen them and will be better able to pay attention to them. Scott, what I'm going to tell you are things that people don't often talk about. I'm going to tell you about how I felt

bad. I'm going to tell you about what was hell for me. I'm going to tell you about what was heaven for me. I'm going to tell you about the presence. I don't know, but maybe the presence will be there. I am going to talk about how to be and how to live and what is God. I will tell you how I came to know these things. You will experience things you could not have imagined prior to this interview. The degree of your openness and non-judgment will determine your learning. Are you ready to begin?

If I had received this introduction from Martha, I might have been better prepared to take advantage of the lessons delivered for our mutual benefit. I didn't, and I wasn't always ready to see where Spirit was taking us. Therefore, Martha's role was that of gatekeeper. She opened the door to the many intellectual and experiential mysteries of the near-death experience. As a result, you will discover them, as I did, a puzzle piece at a time. The only difference is that I will put into context some of the remarks so that you, the reader, don't have to struggle to make sense of them. I invite you to enter empathetically into the story each of the wise ones tells me. By doing so, you might find, as Ring did, that you are better able to grasp the near-death experience in a place beyond words.

Roughly 5 percent of persons having a near-death experience do not find the extraordinary joy and peace that usually come from this encounter. They find the opposite. Dubbed the "less-than-positive" experience by the literature, this encounter is profoundly disturbing. Martha's experience contained this upsetting aspect as well as the warmth and comfort the Light has to give. Her experience was unexpected in its ability to capture the attention of the experiencer and me.

I arrived at Martha's modest home not knowing exactly what to expect. Her directions indicated that her home had a ramp where the front steps would normally be. Greeting me at the front door was a very large woman with a bright smile. As she ushered me into her kitchen, I noticed her plain speech carried great intensity. During the initial

pleasantries, Martha revealed that she was a 57-year-old woman with multiple and severe health problems. On 100 percent disability, she suffered from a diseased liver and the advanced effects of emphysema. Because of this and her size, movement was severely restricted. She was confined to her home most of the time. Throughout her home, Martha had strategically placed chairs, tables, railings, and canes so that she could support herself as she painfully shuffled about her home. Parked by the front door was a motorized chair with an orange flag attached to a long white antenna.

At the time of her near-death experience, doctors had her taking all sorts of pills. Martha medicated for her liver, lungs, and fluid buildup. Martha mistook which pills she had taken and which were next due. The improper taking of her medication led to a severe imbalance and toxic condition that incapacitated her. Living alone and estranged from her family, Martha had few persons looking in on her. No one, especially Martha, anticipated this occurrence before it was too late. A neighbor chanced to find her and called for help. While in the emergency room, Martha had a near-death experience.

We sat in her living room, she in a recliner and I to her right on a crocheted covered sofa. I placed my tape-recorder between us on the end table and ran through my preparatory remarks. I thanked her for participating and reminded her of the qualitative nature of the research and its confidentiality and that this interview was part of my doctoral research and would be written up in a dissertation. Martha had an opportunity to read and sign the consent form. I answered any questions she had about how the time of the interview was to be spent. I reminded her about the necessity for tape-recording and explained how it would be used. I asked her to describe the situation in which she found herself at the time of her near-death experience, including both outer events and inner thoughts. I explained that I would be keeping notes on what she was saying so that we

could go back and further explore subjects that were interesting or needed clarification. Martha indicated that she was nervous about telling her story and would do the best that she could. Martha received a copy of her interview, to which she made clarifying suggestions. These changes are represented here.

### Martha's Story

"I was living in Middledale at the time of the near-death experience. I was having some medical problems and was on a lot of medication. I don't know exactly what happened, but my electrolytes, whatever that is, went way out of whack, and it put me in a twilight zone. I remember sitting in a recliner and a nurse being there, but I don't know how she got there. I don't know who called her or anything, 'cause my kids live an hour and a half away. She told me later I had been sitting in that chair three days. Three days!" Martha repeated, not believing it herself.

"I remember the ambulance because it was so noisy. I hit railroad tracks, and I didn't like that. I remember them hurrying up, and rushing me into the emergency room. Then my daughter was there. I don't know how she got there. I embarrassed her, I made a comment, something about her big boobs, and she got super embarrassed. I remember they did some kind of test on me, asking me my name, the day, math, and things like that. I *could not* answer. I remember asking my daughter if I flunked the test. She said, 'You can't flunk the test, Mother, it's just a measurement to see what kind of care you need.'" In a voice so soft and full of emotion that I could barely hear it, Martha continued, "I couldn't remember my daughter's last name, but I did not want her to know. I remembered her name was Susan, but I couldn't remember her last name. It bothered me.

“I was looking around and I could see things OK. Then, I started to go out. I found I wasn’t in the room. I don’t know where I was except I remember going through a door. It must have been an automatic door for it just opened. I didn’t turn any doorknob or anything. I remember *walking* in there. I swear.” This is striking because Martha could hardly walk without support. “The little walking I do through my house, I grab chairs and stuff, and when I go outside I have to use my scooter. I don’t know where that room was, but it wasn’t in the hospital.

“I wasn’t thinking. There was no thought. My mind was blank. I remember noticing things were white, but not thinking they were white. I just noticed everything was white around me, and it felt good.” I wanted to know more about the qualities of the white light. She groped for words to depict what was beyond depiction. “It was like a brightness. I don’t know if it was really even a brightness. It was bright, but wasn’t bright. It didn’t glare or anything.” Exasperated, she asked me, “Wow, how do I describe something like that?”

Taking a different tack, I asked her to describe what it felt like.

She responded immediately, “Like a hug. Yeah, like a hug.” She signed contentedly, and then furrowed her brows. “Then the brightness kind of faded away and the gray started coming in. The whiteness got a little un-white. There was this line in it.” Martha drew a vertical line in the air, using the edge of her hand to indicate the line. “It was like when you hold a piece of paper up and you see just the slim edge of it. The image started out like the line. When I walked to it,” Martha turned her hand to show me her palm, “it turned so there was a big side with a door that opened. I didn’t want to go through the door. But I don’t think I had a choice. I was told with a feeling like ‘Go.’”

Curious, I asked if this instruction was a voice in her head. “No, it was just a feeling. I knew I was supposed to go through the door.”

Martha cleared her throat. After a long pause, her mood turned dark and she continued, “I went through the door, and there were these spots all over the place. They were spots I had put there.” Another long pause followed, and in the voice of one confessing to a deeply guarded secret, Martha said, “In fact, I put the grayness there.” She waited for my reaction. I nodded and motioned for her to continue. She breathed deeply, each intake progressively more emotional. Her voice soft and trembling, she described the space beyond the door. “It kept getting darker and I couldn’t feel anything. It was just empty. I couldn’t see any people. I couldn’t see the moon. I couldn’t see, but I could feel that something was there--what I thought were shadows. But they were different sizes and different shapes. Some were tiny, tiny, like pin pricks. Some were bigger, like a basketball. I didn’t want these dark shapes to get any closer to me. I *couldn’t* let them get any closer to me. I had to keep them away. Then I knew that I had to keep them away from each other, too. ’Cause if they went together, they would make one big shape and they could swallow me if they did that.” Martha was so emotional that she could barely contain her anguish. “This can’t be real,” she told herself. “It’s just a bad dream. I told myself to just relax, and you will wake up and Susan will be there.” After another long pause, tears streaming down her face, she said, “I opened my eyes and Susan wasn’t there. I then heard a voice and felt a little better. Somebody was telling me, ‘Look. You need to see.’”

As if the words she recalled had just been spoken, Martha took a deep calming breath. “I got kind of quiet. I realized these black things were things that I did. They were bad things that I did or thought, and they had hurt somebody. I remember looking at one



and I could see my family there. I knew I needed to get my family out of that darkness. I needed to get them, get us both, into the light. We had some petty things that I was just using for excuses. I needed to resolve some issues.

“I [saw] one girl that I used to tease in school. The things I said to her I thought [were] funny, because everybody laughed, but I realize now I really, really hurt her.

“I saw my stepdad. I saw why he hated me so much as a kid. I didn’t know at the time that he was my stepdad. I thought he was my real father, and it was such a relief to know that he was not my real father, ’cause he was not a nice guy. He drank and he beat my mother. He was always mean to me. I was careful not to turn my back on him ’cause he would hit me upside the head with something and I didn’t know why. I just knew to stay out of his way.

“Another tiny spot represented just a few seconds of my life. I was a young me walking down the street and seeing a black man approaching from the other direction. When he was next to me I said to him, ‘Nigger, you don’t deserve to be on the same sidewalk as a white person!’ He moved off. I felt powerful. Yet, I also experienced this scene as him. I *felt* the humiliation he felt over what I said. It was awful.

“Then the black shapes showed me things I’d said to other people, things I’d done to other people, that I’d thought weren’t no big deal. But *everything* you do to hurt somebody is a big deal and you answer for it later. I was being told that I had a lot of big deals to resolve. I didn’t think I was really bad or evil or anything. But I think I was being shown that, if I continued to do bad things, even ones that I think didn’t hurt, there would be a big comeuppance about it. Comeuppance, that’s a weird word.” Martha was stalling. She paused and tears welled up, as she looked me in the eye. She cleared her throat and said, “I knew this was the only warning I was going to get. It kind of scared me ’cause I

felt like I had been warned many times before, now that I think about it. I would kind of shrug the warning off as my imagination.”

These black shapes seemed to provide another lens by which Martha gained knowledge about her life just lived. I wanted to know more and asked Martha about the role of the dark balls of energy. She immediately corrected me. “Emptiness. Dark spots of emptiness,” she said. Confused, I asked her if those dark spots of emptiness contained within them some sort of . . . I didn’t know what. “I think it was my sins,” she said. “I stayed away from them. But, if I looked at one I could see what it was all about.” Her voice turned animated, “I could see the story behind it.”

I wondered aloud about why she wanted to stay away from these shapes. She explained, “I was thinking that if I didn’t resolve some of the issues that they all would get together and make one big emptiness. They would swallow me. That terrified me big time. I think that’s why I had nightmares, because there was something bad about that emptiness, very bad. I think it’s as if my existence would recede permanently. Everything good about me that I ever done or accomplished would just be erased. There would be nothing, like I never existed.”

I was now confronted with a dilemma. Martha had encountered dark shapes that contained within them an episode from her life that was deeply distressing. She labeled them her “sins.” Yet, at the same time, her emotional reaction to these shapes was one of emptiness. This emotion scared her to a place beyond imagination, to nightmares. I wondered, How can a shape so full of meaning be responded to by emptiness? I decided to press on by having her draw these shapes. This drawing is found in Appendix H. I also asked Martha to describe more of what happened when she looked at the dark shapes.

She responded, “They weren’t exactly round. They were different sizes and shapes with a different density to them. The feelings I got from experiencing these shapes, I carried afterwards. I was in such horror that I could be so mean to people. That I could actually hurt people with just words or a look or do something against them for my own benefit. I always thought of myself as a nice person. Now I realize that I manipulated a lot of things for my benefit at the expense of other people.” Martha looked with downcast eyes, paused, and, with long breaths, continued, “I know I was given a feeling of what it would be like if I was enveloped by this blackness. I sensed the horror of the emptiness of it. It was so empty. There was no feeling at all. Just a void. It terrified me so much that afterwards I couldn’t look at anything that had anything to do with superstition, like Stephen King books.

“For a long time after that the memory of the emptiness bothered me. I couldn’t watch my favorite TV show because I knew I would see something that would remind me of what I went through. I was really trying to forget how it felt. It did not feel good. I know we’re given choices, and we’re judged by those choices that we make. Though I didn’t realize that we were judged by even the tiniest little choices. To tell you the truth, I don’t know how you could make up for every poor choice, it’s so *overwhelming*.”

“Who did the judging?” I wanted to know. Martha replied in an agitated, disgusted voice, “Apparently the being with me did.” Then suddenly softer she said, “No, he didn’t do any judging. He was just there to tell me that I better take another look at my choices, to see if that’s the way I want to go. He said I have another purpose and I need to pursue that. Besides, I need to pursue that if I want my hugs.” With a sigh of abject resignation, “It’s hard to explain.”

Not wanting to let her off the hook so easily, I asked her to try. “Well, it’s like a small child making choices for her own benefit, instead of benefiting others, which we should be doing,” she said. “We’re all in our own little atmosphere and we can’t perceive the bigger picture. So, we have a tendency to look in our own little atmosphere instead of opening up to what can be, what’s really supposed to be. The more choices in which we choose to hide, the less choices we make for openness. We need to be open, and to move on. Otherwise we stay as this child. We don’t grow. We don’t grow to be what we’re supposed to be. I think choosing for our own benefit is one of the reasons why we don’t get the things that we think we need. We’re being told by the Light that we don’t really need them, that we’re being selfish.”

I asked her to confirm that, in experiencing the dark shapes, she was judging her own behavior. “Yeah, I knew I was the one that did all that. I knew it. I chose to do it, it wasn’t right for me to choose to go that way. I had other options, and they were trying to tell me this. I didn’t need to choose the options for emptiness. I could choose the options for the hugs.” I asked her how this storytelling within the shapes happened. “It’s knowing when I looked. I was shown what was going on, what *could* go on.”

That was now clear: No outside entity judges the life we have lived on Earth. We judge our own behavior and, with the help of a non-physical being, we are shown options of how life could have been had we made other choices. But I still wanted to know more about what happened as we re-experienced the scenes of our lives. “Did we really get to experience it from the perspective of those we hurt?” I asked. “Yes. That’s what surprised me the most,” Martha said. “That’s what really hurt because I didn’t realize at the time that I was causing pain. I thought my actions were funny, a joke. By looking at a dark shape, I could actually see, actually feel how they felt, and what my actions did to them.

It was *really* bad.” The mood became dark again as Martha’s voice began to quiver with emotion. “We don’t realize how much power we have with other people. How much we can hurt them, or how much we can love them. By hurting them, we also do something to them that makes them hurt other people. It’s a wicked domino effect.”

We sat quietly with that emotion for a while. Finally, I broke the spell by inquiring how we could stop the cycle and stop the hurt. Responding more quickly and in a voice stronger than expected, she said, “By sending love, acceptance, and not judging. It’s not our place to judge. Just accept and love. Hopefully they will make the right choices, the choice for the hug.”

Martha wanted to explain how this revelation had affected her life. “I was on the outs with my family. I hadn’t spoken to my mother for over 10 years. I have only had contact with one sister. I’m the oldest of 10. The fighting was over just stupid things. I don’t even remember what most of them were about. After I got home from the hospital, my relationships started getting better. I started writing letters and making telephone calls. I started making contacts, trying to get the family back together again. And it’s working.”

“Who was with you when you were in the darkness? Who was that voice?” I asked. “The being was a combination between a teacher and a protector. I don’t know who it was or what it was. I just knew someone was there if I really needed them.” At this point the energy in the room shifted noticeably. Martha had an inward demeanor, focusing on a memory. “I think it was male. Who is it? Andrew. Do you know Andrew? Who’s Andrew?”

My mind raced to find an Andrew. Then it hit me and I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach. Damn! The only Andrew I knew was an angel on the Sunday night TV show,

“Touched by an Angel.” He was the angel of death and was charged with escorting persons from their physical bodies into heaven. I *had* to check this out to see if she was confused or if this whole interview was an invention based on a television show. And our interview had been going so well! I gave the T signal with my hands as if I was a coach signaling to the referee for a timeout. I expressed my concerns, not very gently.

“Oh Great!” Martha laughed at my suggestion. Then her attitude shifted and, putting her hands on her hips, she declared in a very stern voice, “No, it wasn’t him! My Andrew is different. My Andrew is a teacher trying to teach a dumb child something she wouldn’t listen to! Dumb, stubborn child. Yep. No more thumps on the head, Andrew, I’ll listen.”

I was confused. What was going on? I paused and pressed on. “How long were you sitting looking at these shapes and experiencing the experiences?” I wanted to know. She replied, “I don’t think it was done in time.” Thinking out loud to herself, she said, “How can you not do something in time?” Martha then answered her own question, but repeated words as if they had been told to her in another conversation. “It was done in between time.” Looking up, Martha turned her focus in my direction. “You got me!”

Not sure of what it meant, I pressed on with my questions about the black shapes and how many of them she had experienced. Martha responded after taking a prolonged inventory, saying, “I’d say several hundred. I hope there wasn’t a thousand. I’m sure there were several hundred. They were all over. Some were just the size of a pencil point. One shape was where I beat up that high school senior. I was just a ninth grader, a tomboy. Being oldest of 10 kids, I was pretty tough. He started picking on my sister. I didn’t realize at the time he wouldn’t hit me back because I was a girl and because I was so young. I beat the stuffing out of him. He had a bloody nose, bloody lip, everything. He

got teased so bad about it in school, and I made it worse by laughing at him. That was there in the shapes. I didn't have to fight him. I could have just said he was teasing my sister. He was flirting with her, but I didn't know that. I thought he was just being mean, so I popped all over him. Little innocent things like that you think would be OK, but they're not OK. If they hurt somebody, *they're not OK*.

"I'm sure there's a lot of things I won't be able to resolve. I had a cousin. He was about 10 or 11 years old when I was about 5. He was digging a hole, out in the back yard. He was trying to dig up the dirt with a pick ax, get it loosened. He had a pretty good size hole goin' there, and I was standing on the edge watching him. I slipped and fell in just as he came down with the pick ax. He hit me in the head. I have a scar up here, on my head. I had blood all over the place. My mother came out, and she screamed and fainted dead away. I remember telling him, 'You're going to be sorry you did that. I'm going to get you back for it!' I was just a young kid. I was lashing out because I was hurt. But, he died about 10 years ago. I never got a chance to see him after that, and tell him I didn't mean it. And it bothered me when I heard that he died. He was in a car accident. That disappointment shape was there in the grayness, too. So how can I resolve that?"

Martha's attention turned inward again, her voice turned soft and low, and she again sounded as if she was repeating a conversation heard inside her head. She repeated, "He's gone. Talk to him. OK, Andrew, I'll talk to him." Then with an affectionate chuckle she said, "I know, I'm screwy, crazy."

I thought I had it: Andrew had joined us and was talking to Martha. I could not see him or hear him. I was hearing one side of the conversation between Martha and Andrew. I asked Martha if she was in communion with Andrew. She confirmed this and

added, “Now that I know his name, he’s going to hear a lot from me. I didn’t know his name before tonight.”

“Welcome, Andrew,” I said. Flustered and not exactly sure of what to say to a non-physical teacher/protector, I stuck to the script and said to Martha, “Do you have a sense that it’s your job to fix things, resolve the problems revealed in the dark shapes?” Martha replied, “The ones that I can. Try to make up for the hurt. I was surprised. I thought maybe my sisters, brothers, and my mother wouldn’t remember the incidents that pulled us apart. Usually, you remember one thing and they remember something else entirely different. It wasn’t the case. When I started talking to them, we remembered the details. So, the incidents must have made a problem for them. We’re working on resolving things. It’s not a thing you’re going to do in one phone call or one letter. But, the doors are open, so we’re working on it.”

Another aspect of Martha’s description intrigued me: her being terrified of the void. She corrected me, “The emptiness, not the void. The emptiness terrifies me because there’s nothing there, absolutely nothing. The difference is that you can have a void, and still have something in it. Can’t you? Like air or pressure. Emptiness is nothing, absolutely nothing. It even goes past nothing. I don’t know how to explain it. It’s more like a feeling than anything. It’s like when I first woke up. My memory was not back yet, and I was looking around at everything, absolutely not a thought in my head. I wasn’t even thinking about not thinking. It just made my mind blank. That’s how it was. But it stayed that way for quite a bit before I blacked out again. When I came back and there was no thought, I just hung out. I meditated later to see if I could do it--empty my mind and just look around--look at things and not think about what they were. Just look at ’em.



I can't do it very long. Usually colors start coming in and when that starts, then you let whatever color you want take you wherever you want to go."

"How do you do that?" I wondered aloud. Martha responded, "You totally relax and empty your mind because you have to have a clear mind. Usually your mind is so busy that you can't hear anything. It just goes buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz. What you need to do is get rid of that buzzing. You get rid of that and focus on a candle light, or any light, or any point. I can do it on almost any point, and then things start fading out. Like I wouldn't hear the radio in the kitchen. I wouldn't hear the wind blowing outside. Everything started getting like tunnel vision, getting dimmer and dimmer and dimmer. At the center of it, there's no thought. Then soon as that gets a little wider and stuff, colors start coming in, like gold, blues, pinks, all different colors swirling around. You focus on one color until it takes up your whole vision, and then it can take you to wherever you want to go. Sometimes you can direct it, but most of the time you're being directed.

"One time when I meditated like this, I went to a house and I was standing in the front porch. It was a mansion. It had these two big white pillars on the side, and it had double glass doors. The side doors were glass, too. I was standing on the bottom step looking at the door, and then I zipped back again. I don't know why, where I was, or anything.

"Then another time, I was on top of my roof in Middledale. I was sitting looking at a red car parked down around the bend. It was a little tiny red car and this young girl got out of it. She walked up the sidewalk into a house. Right across from my house was a cat. The cat was sitting on the sidewalk looking right at me. I zipped back in. I was in my recliner then, and I got up, and ran out the front door. I looked, and the cat was sitting there looking at me kinda funny, like it was ready to run. I looked down the sidewalk to

see if I could see that red car. I couldn't see it, so I walked up into my driveway, and then I could see the car sitting down there. It was actually there! And I thought, OK, what happened here?

“Another time I was floating over a huge city looking down at a whole bunch of lights and traffic. I remember smelling coffee, and I jerked back. So, I don't know. What am I doing?” I replied that her descriptions sounded like classic out-of-body experiences.

Martha acknowledged this and went on to describe why this might be so. “I felt one time when I jerked out. I was relaxing in my chair, trying to leave my body. I started by trying to get relaxed. I kept thinking, ‘My body is so heavy. I want out of my body. I want out of my body. It's too heavy. It's too heavy.’ I was relaxing and thinking these thoughts. I got real, real quiet, and I popped right out of my neck. I could feel it. You heard that before, really? And that's what that is? Wow.” As I nodded my head in affirmation she continued, “What's the purpose of it, though? I know I felt so good when I got out, 'cause I was lighter, and I remember thinking, ‘I'm free, I'm free.’

“I changed a lot since I went through this, believe me. I now pick up things, like somebody told me you were safe. You were OK to talk to, and I needed to talk to you. I picked that up in a dream. Yeah, I was thinking last night, ‘Scott is gonna be over tomorrow at 7. Hope he calls and cancels.’ I was trying to will you to call and cancel our interview because I was a little apprehensive. I thought I wasn't going to remember anything, anyhow. Then somebody says, ‘Talk to him. What's it gonna hurt? Don't be such a baby.’”

I wondered how Martha's near-death experience had changed her. She offered, “Before I was kind of a loner. I didn't want to participate in anything. If people would call me up, I would just say, ‘No, I'm not interested.’ I went out and had coffee with my

lady friends. But that was the extent of my being social. Now, if someone calls me up, I think, ‘Well, I’m supposed to be talking to this person or she wouldn’t be calling me.’ So, I find out what the heck is going on. I believe there’s a *reason* I come in contact with people. And, I need to find out what that reason is. If I try to push it aside, they’re going to keep coming back at me saying, ‘Hey, take a look at me!’ I kind of opened up that way. I’m more aware of what’s going on outside my little atmosphere here. This is really weird but sometimes I pick up people’s thoughts. You heard that before?” I nodded my head yes. “Oh, my God, I should have talked to you a long time ago! I wouldn’t feel like I was really flipping out.

“I was walking down this hall, and I was looking down at the floor, really not even thinking about anything. I was going to lunch, and I passed this one girl. She said, ‘Oh my God, she’s so fat,’ when she passed me. I knew she didn’t say it out loud. Just as she started passing me, I looked her right in the face and said, ‘You should be careful of what you think. Some people know.’ She turned so white. She turned *so* white. It was unbelievable.

“I heard her thoughts. I also send thoughts to people, too. I did it one time just to see if I could do it. This one lady I do not like, because she is a gossip, and she did the kind of gossip where you hurt people. It wasn’t just information and stuff. It was the ‘start something’ kind of gossip. She was sitting across the room from me working, and she had her head down. I was sitting there working, too, and I concentrated on her face. I thought really, really hard, ‘You are a bitch! You love hurting people.’ She stood right up in the room, and she said, ‘What? Who said that? Who said that?’ I kept my head down.” Chuckling to herself, Martha said, “She heard it out loud and I thought, ‘This is pretty cool.’”

“I had the idea that Andrew would like you to send *loving* thoughts,” I told her. She snapped, “I was so angry with her because she hurt one of my friends.” Softening she said, “But yeah, you’re not supposed to judge. You’re not supposed to get even.”

“I also gotta be careful, because if I stare into water, I kinda go into a twilight zone and then I can pick up like some premonitions and stuff. For instance, I was at Birdland State Park, sitting on the bench there, right by the water. I was just relaxing, watching the sun glinting off the water. I looked at the trees, and breezes were blowing the leaves. I was totally relaxed, and then everything got real quiet. There was no sound. I could see everything. But there was absolutely no sound. I couldn’t hear the water. I could see the tree leaves moving. But there was no rustling or anything. I looked back down at the water and I could see a man and his family starting to walk across the bridge that goes over the river. They stopped to look at the falls and I could see him turn around, and as he sat on the rail I could see his billfold fall out of his pocket. It went down into the creek. I knew he won’t get it, either, ’cause it’s not going to float, it’s stuck underneath a slanted rock. Then I came out of it and watched the family cross the bridge in real life. It happened just like I saw just a few moments earlier.”

Feeling like we had enough on this subject, I switched gears and asked Martha, “How do you live with what you know?” She replied, “I’m learning. I’m still learning. I need to talk to somebody that knows what the heck is going on, so I can learn, because I’m doing all this on my own. It seems like I’m not getting anywhere. It’s just so slow. I pick up lots of things. Sometimes things will catch my attention, like something on TV, or a line in a book, or something like that. If I start concentrating on that, then some more information will come in with it. But, *it’s hard. It’s hard.* Maybe what I’m trying to find out is ‘learn all this stuff’ and ‘find out what the heck am I supposed to do with it.’ I

*don't* know what I'm supposed to do with these new experiences, knowledge, and feelings. I don't know."

After a long pause, I decided to try to be helpful and suggested that I thought that was between Martha and Andrew. Chuckling, she said, "No, I think it goes a little higher than Andrew. Yeah, I definitely believe there's a God. I used to be sarcastic about it. And flippant. People were saying, you know, that they resolve some of their issues through praying and stuff--I know prayer works. I know if you send a prayer about somebody, even if you don't know her, it gets through. And the more people that pray, the stronger it is. But if you *say* you're going to do it, and you don't do it, then you got a problem. Better not say you're going to do something. Keep your promises, *especially to kids*."

It was occurring to me that much of Martha's near-death experience had been designed to set her thinking straight. She seemed to have attracted those events that were specifically designed to give her the experience necessary to acquire a new perspective with which to view her life. The phrase "you get what you need" popped into my head as this revelation continued. Trusting this communication, I turned to Martha to confirm what had just come to me. I asked, "You were in this loving hug, and then you were shown absolute emptiness. Why do you think you were shown both ends of the spectrum?" Without hesitation she answered, "Because, I haven't accomplished what I was supposed to accomplish. I haven't even started on it, whatever it is. What am I supposed to do?"

Something unusual was happening during that last question. The energy shifted noticeably in the room. Martha was also now talking to someone else with this question. Her visual focus had turned inward. Her eyes were downcast and her gaze unfocused. It was as if she was attuned to an inward conversation and with an unseen participant.

Answers were not directed at me, but just said aloud for my benefit. Her voice was flattened, with not much expression.

Martha intoned, “Besides make up with my family, and tell a lot of people I’m sorry I hurt them. Something with my hands. Something with my hands. Something with my hands. Some kind of energy? I don’t know. What energy?”

Martha’s focus shifted toward me, “Scott, what energy? Oh, I’m going crazy. What’s this? Can you see it? Energy around my fingers.” Martha’s voice was now animated, “Yeah, all around my fingers.” Her words were now flowing at a rapid pace, “OK, these two, right here. Can you see the energy connect them . . . coming together?”

I nodded in agreement. I could see a brilliant whitish haze around the fingers of each hand.

Excited, Martha continued, “I can feel that . . . What is that? I can stretch it out, and it stays there.”

The energy shifted completely again. Now back to an inward focus, Martha was talking to herself. “I can sense I’m supposed to be doing something with my hands, something good with my hands and I’m not sure what it is. In fact, I really don’t have any idea what it is. Just something about touching. Touching what? I don’t know.”

Curious, I asked her to describe what the energy looked like around her hands. Martha described, “Well, close to my skin, it’s white, further out it’s like gold, and a little bit of blue in it, mostly gold. When I look at you, it’s all around you! Right close to your skin it’s like a thin line of red. And then it’s like a light blue, then pinkish white, but yours is thick, it’s about that thick, mine is real thin, mine is. What *is it* when one light touches another one? You hear the energy? It’s kinda like, a hum? I bet you could hear it if it got quiet enough. Hold your finger up. Can you feel that?” I nodded yes. I could feel

an electric-type tingling emanating from her hand to mine. “Wow. What am I supposed to do with my energy?”

I was now wondering how she got her information from Andrew and other intuitive sources activated by the near-death experience. “Prayer?” I offered. Martha answered, “You mean more dreams. That’s where most things come to me. Dreams and meditation, when I get super relaxed. I can see a picture show goin’. Sometimes I don’t understand it, but I can just see it. Once, I was sitting on my little porch. Everything was very quiet. I made myself quiet and I could feel the wood of the railing humming and the colors. It still had life. Amazing. I look outward and for a time I felt connected. I then understood that I was there to learn. To see how everything and everyone is part of everything else. What we do affects not only ourselves, but also everything in the universe. What you send out is what you get back. If *you want* happiness, contentment, peace, and love, then that’s what *you give* to others.

“In one picture show I was in a big Cadillac, a huge chauffeur-driven Cadillac. I was on this narrow road. One side was a sheer wall of rock and stone. Down below were groups of families playing in the sun. There were dogs playing. There were flowers all over the place. It was sunny, beautiful, and breezy. But the road was so narrow that one half of the wheel kept almost sliding over the edge of it. I was trying to keep that car on that narrow path, that huge car. I was getting frantic, because I couldn’t do it. It kept wanting to pull off, and wreck me. All of a sudden, somebody picked me up, slammed me in the back seat and said, ‘You’re not driving, I am!’ Then I relaxed. It was OK.”

Listening to a tale about a being in control of our lives prompted me to ask, “So how do you know there’s a God?” Martha replied, “I think that’s where I get my hugs. He’s like everything. I used to just kinda blow off the existence of God and say, ‘You

know, it's nothing.' But it *is* something." Reflectively, Martha continued, "I think Andrew is the one that thumps me on the head once in awhile, though. He's the one that threw me in the back of that Caddy. He's driving. OK, drive. Wait till I talk to him."

It struck me when Martha was describing where there was no thought, that she was experiencing real freedom. I asked Martha if she would agree with that. With enthusiasm, she exclaimed, "Yeah, I was free! I was like open, new! There was an open space there for things to come in that weren't usually in my mind. I was open to receive whatever needed to be sent to me."

Jumping back to my notes, I picked out a statement about the difference between religion and spirituality. I asked her to describe the difference. She explained, "To me, 'religion' is like going to church with a group of people and worshiping together. And 'spiritual' is your belief in God, your belief that there's goodness in yourself, and in everybody else, and that you should pursue that goodness."

### Reflection

Martha opened wide the door to near-death experiences. She made real the common elements described by Moody. She experienced ineffability; the feeling of total peace and well-being in the form of hugs; feeling that one's consciousness has been detached from the physical body; being in the presence of a "being of light," her teacher/protector; undergoing a three-dimensional panoramic life review; suddenly returning to one's physical body; being reluctant or afraid to tell others; undergoing value changes toward life; experiencing a change in attitude toward death; and corroboration of out-of-body events. This remarkable breadth of experience allowed me to witness so much of a near-death experience that I had not previously known. My experience had



been limited to joy and experience with the Light. With Martha, I came to know much more about the totality of the experience.

Several things struck me about Martha as she described her experiences. Even though emotional, she did not treat these experiences as anything other than normal. In fact, Martha practiced some of the skills learned during the encounter for later experimentation. These included out-of-body separation and travel, no-thought meditation, hearing another person's thoughts, sending thoughts, visioning, and dream work.

Common after-effects as described by Ring also applied to Martha. After-effects experienced by Martha included value changes that deepened love and concern for others; increased spirituality; decreased participation in formal religions; better self-image; decreased fear of death; increased acceptance of others; heightened quest for knowledge; increased sense of purpose in life; decreased concern for impressing others; problems readjusting; and keeping quiet about the experience. Both Moody and Ring stated that no one has all the common elements or all the aftereffects of a near-death experience. However, if there ever was a poster child for this phenomenon, Martha would be in the running. This breadth of experience gave me a basis of comparison when I encountered similar experiences with the other participants. It allowed me to ask better questions and seek deeper answers.

It was, however, not the type of experiences that caught my attention but rather the nature of them. As mentioned previously, they seemed normal to Martha. I took particular note of how Martha moved around her non-physical environment; she did it with intention. No one had to instruct her how to move, see, smell, or activate the black shapes. She knew. Communication via thought and speech worked for her. During her

past-life review, the ability to move into another person's experience seemed normal. This suggested two things: first, that all memories are recorded and available; second, that there are no boundaries surrounding these memories. They do not "belong" to one person or are guarded and sequestered away for just the instruction of the originator. All experience seems available to everyone for the purpose of instruction. The choices we made had repercussions. The ripple effects of our actions were available for everyone to use.

Multiple, simultaneous consciousnesses were experienced. This one aspect of the past-life review called into question so many of my beliefs about what constitutes a person. I am used to the idea that I have one viewpoint. Yet this multifaceted experience expanded that definition dramatically. I began to wonder, which experience is Martha's?

Martha touched on several topics that I wanted to be alert to in my later interviews. These included actions happening "between time," freedom equating to the dissolution of boundaries and openness to new, near-death experiencers getting what they need, everyone is good, God is love and hell is the separation from that love, there is no heaven and no hell, no such thing as coincidence, we get what we give, sin is hurting others, no one judges us other than ourselves, potential futures exist, prayer works, and God is everything.

Martha contributed four major themes to my thinking. First was exposure to a wide array of experiences; second was insight on how to be in this world--by sending love and acceptance and not judging; third was how everything and everyone is part of everything else, that what we do affects not only ourselves, but everything in the universe; fourth was the disquieting feeling that what is being experienced is a symptom for some underlying order. What was knocking around in my brain was the idea that

Martha was reacting to something. What it was I didn't know yet. My next wise one filled in another piece of the puzzle.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Holly

“It means to be able to stand in the place where I can hold my own truth,  
my own integrity and yet see somebody else for who they are;  
and hear their truth; and know it's just as valid as mine.”

*-Holly*

Holly was a doctoral candidate in the human resources field whose life seemed worlds apart from the life and circumstances of Martha. As Martha was simple and direct, Holly was eloquent and comfortable with ambivalence. Holly's interview is important because of her ability to articulate the different reality of the non-physical universe. Like Martha, she described this arena as normal or “not weird,” yet very dissimilar from the physical. Holly did not have a past-life review from which to judge her own behavior. However, she did take away from her experience important lessons on how she was to be and to live life.

Holly was the mother of three girls, living in a pleasant suburban home and surrounded by the signs of a growing family. I arrived at 7 p.m., only to find that everyone in the household was running late. After some commotion over schedules and transportation to various events, I was invited to join her, her husband, and his best friend for a late dinner. I gratefully accepted and shared a delightful conversation with parents glad for a night away from their children. Holly and her husband ran a mail order catalogue business offering spiritual gifts and books. Everywhere I looked, I saw evidence of a busy middle-class family, alive with the joys and challenges that family life brings.

I met with Holly in the living room of her home. Various cats and dogs, all of which seemed interested in hearing our conversation, surrounded us. They stayed for the entire interview. I thanked Holly for participating. After getting my tape recorder set up, I went through the customary preparatory remarks and paperwork for the interview. Upon completion of these tasks, I asked Holly to describe the situation in which she found herself at the time of her near-death experience, including both outer events and inner thoughts.

### Holly's Story

“My three experiences took place around Labor Day Weekend of 1981. I was 29 years old and living in Waterloo, Iowa. I was in Iowa City for a job interview at the University of Iowa. I went to the interviews, even though I was feeling like I had a cold. During the night I felt ill. In fact, I was burning up with a fever of 105. The next morning, my family took me to the hospital. I remember that, as my sister reached out and touched my hand, I shrieked in pain. It felt like my skin just peeled back. A rash was progressing rapidly from my trunk to all over my limbs. It was very, very painful. It was like someone had dunked me in boiling oil. Right after that, I went into an anaphylactic shock and my heart stopped.

“I remember watching the scene from the upper corner of the room.” Chuckling, Holly explained. “I can still recall it very well--watching (the medical staff) run around, do a code 4, get the crash cart, put the electrodes on the chest, administer three shocks to the heart and inject adrenaline directly into my heart. I remember being up there thinking, ‘Boy, these people are really busy.’ I was in a different reality, you know. I wasn't experiencing any pain. I had the sensation of floating, watching my own body down on

the table and all these people running around doing stuff. I felt perfectly safe and comfortable up there. It didn't seem weird or anything else. It was a whole different view. Then, all of a sudden, shrooowhooosh, I was right back in my body with all the pain. But then my body was unconscious, so upon reentry I went unconscious very quickly after this big rush of pain. I was in and out of consciousness for about six weeks.

“At some point, I was transferred to a private room. They put me on massive doses of steroids. That’s the only way they could keep me alive. My second near-death experience came in the middle of the night when my heart stopped beating. Someone was whispering in my ear that it was time to go and that I should get my things. I remember getting up out of bed (although I *really* couldn't move--so I'm sure it wasn't my physical body getting up out of the bed), and I started walking. It was the classic walking toward the Light. It was very distant at first and very attractive. Then it got larger and larger. At first it was in the upper corner of the room, and then as I took one or two steps toward it, the Light was in front of me. I walked into this Light. I could look back and see my body on the bed. My body was strapped down on the bed because I had been thrashing around.

“The farther I stepped into the Light, the brighter it got. Then this whole tunnel of Light appeared. It wasn't a yellow light; it was white light, and yet there was refracted light from a prism shining all around it. The refracted colors surrounded the outside of the white light. It was incredibly beautiful, like nothing I'd ever seen before. It was so, so beautiful, so stunning, and incredibly peaceful, too. I wanted to run into it because it was so wonderful--but I couldn't. I didn't want to miss an inch of it. I wanted to take my time. There was this juxtaposition of peace and emotion. Then I began to see faces. Now when I say *see*, it wasn't like I was physically seeing these faces. It was more of a knowing of the presence of people that I knew. They were all people who I had known in my life, in

this life, who had died. I remember my great-grandmother was there. She had died at age 92 when I was 10. I remember a friend of mine from college who died in a tragic fire.” Stuttering with emotion, Holly continued. “He was there, and another very dear person. I saw my grandfather who had died a week before I was born. I’d only seen a few pictures of him. Again, it wasn’t a physical recognition of their features. It was just more of a knowing of Grandpa, you know.”

In an excited voice of welcome, Holly exclaimed, “*It’s you! I finally get to meet you!*” It was incredibly comforting. They were reaching their hands out to me, except nobody had hands. I asked, ‘Do I have to go back? I don’t want to go back.’ They replied, ‘Yes, you have to go back.’ I said, ‘No, I don’t want to go back. I’m not going back!’ Oh, my dog from childhood was there, too. She was my best friend.

“Then I started hearing voices calling me back. Voices from physical reality, friends of mine I was very close to in Iowa. These people were calling me back, repeating, ‘Holly, come back. There’s work to do.’ I remember that very specific message: ‘There’s work to do; you’re not done; you can’t go; you have to go back.’ And I was arguing. This place was really cool and I was *not* going back.” She was vehement.

In a voice that revealed intense irritation, she said, “Then all of a sudden, whoosh, I was back in my body again. My first recollection was hearing the sound of the heart monitor--you know, the emergency drone when somebody flat-lines. I didn’t remember anything else until the next morning when I asked the nurse who was checking my vitals what had happened. She said, ‘Well, honey, you were really sick. We almost lost you last night.’ I said, ‘Oohh, I wish you could have let me go. It was so wonderful.’ I remember the expression on her face because she wasn’t surprised at all when I said that. It was confirmation. When she did that, I realized it wasn’t a dream. It wasn’t until months later,

when I read my own medical charts, that I realized exactly what had happened to me physically. I knew what had happened to me on a spiritual level, but I didn't realize what had happened on the physical level except for that obnoxious flat-line buzzing.

“Here’s what I remember about the third incident. I had been in the hospital for somewhere between three and four weeks. One night I couldn't sleep very well, so I was up walking the halls with my little rolling IV tree. They wanted me to move around so I could regain some of my strength. I was exploring the hospital late at night. It must have been 3 or 4 in the morning when I went past the chapel with maybe four pews on each side. It was very tiny. It had some kind of artificial stained glass window. I went in there. As I walked across the threshold, I remember thinking, ‘Gee, I really want to go back to the Light.’ I was so tired of being in pain. I was so weak. It had been so nice. All of a sudden, the Light was right there in front of me, not up in the corner like it had been initially the second time. There was a big white tunnel and I had a choice to step into it. I remember stepping into it and saying, ‘Yes, I'm ready. It's time to go. I really want to go.’ I started to walk down this light corridor and there was a presence.” As an aside, she confided, “I don't know what to call it. I'm not Christian per se, so I can't call it Jesus or even a god-type figure. I want to use the word ‘divine,’ but I'm trying to avoid religious terms here.”

I told her that I understood and she returned to her story. “There was some presence that was a master or some hierarchical being. It was much more than the beings that I had felt before--the ones that I was related to or had known. This seemed like a presence of a higher stature. It wasn't clear to me what that stature was, but it was obviously some authority presence. It was communicated to me--not that it was a verbal dialogue, but a non-verbal communication took place--that I had a choice to go or stay. If



I did choose to leave the physical, I needed to know that part of that choice was leaving some things unfinished. The things that would be unfinished were extremely important. But, if my pain was too much and I needed to go, I could go.”

Agitated again, Holly explained that this was a tough decision because she really didn't want to be in pain anymore. “I told myself, ‘If I have to go back, I guess I'll go back. But I really don't want to. I really, really don't want to.’ There was this deep sadness in me about going back to the physical, because I wanted to go home, and home was this sense of place that was familiar. I'm not talking about my home in Iowa now.

“All of a sudden, I remember being helped into a wheelchair. Someone had come into the chapel and found my body crumpled there on the floor next to my IV tree. The next morning, some friends from Iowa called to see how I was. I told them about this latest incident and said, ‘I went to this place last night, and it was so neat, and I really didn't want to go back, and I was told I had to go back because there's this stuff unfinished, and I really didn't want to.’” Holly's voice was hushed. “My friend Roberta said, ‘I had a dream last night that you died. I didn't want to let go of you yet. But I also knew that you had a choice to make. It was OK if you made that choice. So I'm really calling to tell you that, if you need to go, it's OK. But I don't want you to go.’ I said, ‘I guess I made my choice last night because I didn't go.’” Her voice was barely audible. “Here was somebody calling to tell me that they had had this dream at the same time I was having my experience.”

Holly paused to catch her breath, deeply moved by the retelling of her own story so many years later. There were several points that I wanted her to clarify or expand upon. I referenced my notes while she regained her composure. In phrasing my questions,

I tried to use Holly's words so as to not prejudice her answers. In summarizing, I tried to seek confirmation.

I started out by asking about her range of emotions when she described her first out-of-body experience. The words she had used and the tone of her voice indicated to me that she was emotionally detached. She agreed. "It was very much a third-person perspective. I'd never seen myself from this perspective and it was very unemotional. It wasn't even a sense of relief--not being in any pain--because there was no consciousness of pain up in that corner.

I had been struck by her use of "not weird" in describing her first near-death experience. I asked her to elaborate. "It didn't seem weird to me. There wasn't any sense that this was wrong or strange or somehow threatening. I was very comfortable with the whole event. I remember the awareness of it as a different perspective of seeing myself."

Because hers was the first experience with the tunnel that I had encountered, I wanted to know more of what it was like. I asked her how far she got in the white tunnel. "I guess that's a matter of perspective. I'd say 20, 30 feet. Far enough to sense the presences. I can see the tunnel in my mind as I talk about it. I can feel its presences of people that I have known, freeing me as I walk down this corridor. So it must have been quite a few feet. There were a lot of beings or presences there but there were certain ones that stood out for me. It was like coming off a plane and there's that railing. They were there greeting me. As I came into this corridor, there were some that I recognized." In a voice soft and airy, she added, "It was really neat."

Holly paused, reclaimed her normal voice, and went back to my original question. "Space is different in that realm. It was hard to measure," she explained. I asked if she had to stop. Her voice softened again. "I still regret that I came back. I ached for the

longest time after that, all through my recovery, even for years after. I ached over that sense of being in the Light and having to leave. It was a sense of really wanting to be there but knowing I had to leave. It was a different kind of emotional intellect. It was intellectually knowing I needed to be in the physical but aching, longing as if I had been separated from a loved one. It was not aching in the sense of worry, but in the sense of a lack of wholeness. I haven't put these words to it before. I haven't thought about it before.” She let her words fall off.

Following up on that emotional discovery, I asked what emotions were there for her in the Light. Holly thought for a while before she responded. “The biggest feeling would be the sense of belonging, the sense of homecoming. It's a sense of rightness, of being in the right place, being whole, being where I belonged. It's hard to describe in words. I know that's how you do qualitative research; you have to do it in words. Language is very inadequate for the range of some human experiences, especially in a spiritual context. There literally are not words. I feel like my mouth is not evolved enough to speak whatever that truth is. So how can I give you a sense of it so you can write it up? I'll try.

“I get pictures and I get feelings, not so much emotional context. They're sensory feelings about the experience. I don't get as much auditory sensation as I do a tactile sensation. So I guess there are additional and different ways of knowing. For me, it tends to come as pictures.”

One of the things that struck me was that Holly was in a place that didn't involve conscious thought. She was telling me things she was experiencing but not telling me what she was thinking. I asked whether there was thinking going on. “There was no sense of, ‘Gee, where am I?’ or any kind of logical or rational thinking in trying to interpret

what the experience was. In fact, that question has come up before. I haven't shared this with very many people, but when I've shared these experiences they've asked where I thought I was. I don't know. Didn't think about it. Didn't matter. Wasn't relevant to the situation, you know. I tend to over-think things in this life, but there wasn't a sense of that at all. It was like when I had the first experience and was up in the corner. There was no sense of, 'What am I doing up here? Who is that down there? Oh, my God, that's me!' There was none of that thinking. It was just pure. It was just being. It was just right then. There was no sense of past or present. Obviously, there was a sense of past connection with these beings, but there was no sense of future or now or then. It was just this sort of *is*. It was all-present, a place where there wasn't a sense of time dimension. You were asking me how far in the tunnel I went. I'm describing for you a corridor and I'm looking at these beings as I'm moving into the tunnel. There was that sense of spatial dimension and there was a sense of moving into it. But in terms of a time dimension, it was just *is*."

Holly's description of a non-physical body seemed more amorphous than the descriptions used by Martha. This intrigued me. I asked her to give me more detail on the connection that took place when she was touched by the "non-hand."

"It intrigued me, too. It wasn't like my hand touching their hand. In fact, it wasn't like I even had any physical sense of myself. It was just a sense. It wasn't like I could see my body. No, I was seeing the whole thing from my own eyes but with no sense of seeing my body. My hands, my feet, or whatever it was moving--it was just being. The connection you're asking about: There was a sense of reaching out and the other being reaching back to me, reaching toward me, but it was not a physical thing. There were no hands reaching out. I can recall that connection and it felt like fingertips touching fingertips, but there was no arm, there was no hand. It was more of an energy connection,

if that makes sense. None of this makes sense, but that's OK. It's my reality, or non-reality, as the case may be." She shrugged.

I asked which world was real. Holly laughed and volleyed a question back at me: "Is *that* in your research?"

"Hey, you brought it up!" I quipped, and we both laughed.

"I don't know, but it certainly opens a bigger range of possibilities than I'd been taught before," she added, still teasing. It was clear that she had thought about this subject and just needed a little prompting to discuss it. Teasing again, I said, "Oh waffle, waffle."

Holly mused, took a deep breath and said, "Waffle, waffle, waffle. Yes. That world is very real to me. Even now, all these years later, when I think about this, it's extremely real." To make her point, she gave me an example from another time in her life.

"When my father died, he came back to visit me. My experience is, people always come back to the ones who loved them. They do this just to reassure us and then they go on. But there's a time gap before they can come back, because they've got a lot to learn over there. There's a lot of re-entry work to do. They've got to figure out the new rules and everything else in their new abode, catch up with all those persons they haven't seen for a long time. Every so often, my mother will say, 'I dreamed about your father again.' But I'm not surprised, because I've had experiences when people I've known have died and came back to have some kind of contact with me. I thought that was weird until I had my own near-death experience. Then it made complete sense."

I asked Holly which parts of the near-death experience were the most difficult for her. "What's difficult is to have something that's such a profound inner sense that cannot readily be shared with other people. I'll share it if somebody's receptive to it, but I don't

impose it on anybody. I guess I've come to understand that this is the way of things, the physics of reality for me. I'm willing to let other people have their own understanding of these experiences. But for some [near-death experiencers], it's so new and so startling that they've just got to write a book about it and go on the talk show circuit. I just want to say, 'Oh, calm down. This is normal.'

"It would be easy to say, 'Oh, I had to go back because I had to do something really significant.' I could really be full of myself about this. But what I got out of my near-death experiences was a really strong sense of humility. Whatever it is that I've yet to do--I'm assuming that since I'm still here it's not done yet--may be tremendously insignificant in the greater scope but vital at the same time. It may be something as small as turning left instead of turning right. The mere act of me doing it creates whatever chain of events or energy that will influence other things. And that one little piece is important enough.

"So it's not like I had to go back because I'm going to rescue the world or invent the cure for AIDS. I've never had a sense of it like that. I've just had a sense that my role as a supporting cast member was important. I don't have to be the star of my drama. I may never even know what my role is. I'm real OK with that. I used to be so ego-based that I always had to be the star. Now I don't feel that way. I've gotten quieter, more humble. I've gotten more accepting of ambiguity. You know, I really like myself now.

"My supporting role has to be conscious, always watchful, always waiting for whatever that moment of significance is. I think humility comes from not knowing what it is that's important. It's just being present.

"I had three chances--three chances, not one--to bail, and each time I came back, reluctantly. I don't know what it was in me that made me come back. Maybe we fulfill

our purpose and then we die. Or maybe we fulfill the mission and never know it, and by the grace of whatever get to hang around to meet our grandchildren.

“I'm very grateful. I'm very blessed. I know I would not have my new husband for my partner if I hadn't done what I was ultimately forced to do. So I think I have been led in some ways. You know I hesitate to even use that expression, ‘being led,’ because I think we all have choices. I think that's what life's about, is making those choices. Free will, from a religious perspective, is the crux of the human experience. It's what you do with all these options that counts. You can use it for good. You can use it for evil. You can just muck around and sit on the couch, or you can be significant in whatever realm. You can just be a good person. Be kind. I don't know what it's all about. I don't need to know everything, because I don't think it's about this realm as much as it is about the next place.

I reminded her that we'd been talking about difficulties. “I think people's judgment is what makes it hard to share [the near-death experience]. This is my personal near-death experience and it's my truth. I don't need it to be evaluated by anybody else. I know this experience in my core the same way that I know breathing. I know it like birds know how to fly. It's beyond instinctual. It is part of my being. There is almost nothing in life that I know with that level of conviction. It is knowledge and truth that is irrefutable from my perspective. I appreciate that other people don't have that perspective, or can't experience it, or through their training or teachings are not open to it. I don't confront them. It's not something I want anybody to evaluate for me.

“I use to be a real doubting Thomas. I'm not now, you know. I'm more loving. I'm more tolerant. In terms of difficulties, the near-death experiences make me more impatient and intolerant of some of the bigotries I see. They're so petty. At the same time,

I'm trying to balance that with acceptance of whatever it is they need to do. It's real contradictory. On the one hand, knowing what is real for me; and on the other hand, being willing to let other people know whatever it is that's real for them.

“On the deepest level, what's difficult is wanting to be in that Light and not being there. That's what's difficult. It's a conscious sacrifice not to be there. The biggest thing I can say is sacrifice. I've told other people about my near-death experience. I've sat with them on the edge of death and told them about it. Just recalling it now is so real. Maybe that's the comfort, knowing that it's there and waiting and accessible whenever I need to go there. Yeah, it's almost like I can touch it. It has been that way ever since it happened. It's very calming. I think that's why I've continued to do some spiritual work, to maintain that.”

I asked Holly about how her near-death experiences affected her relationships. “In terms of relationships, people don't always understand without judging or evaluating. They think you are weird if you talk about it. So I learned to not talk about it. Or I talk about it with people who've had these experiences or within a context where it's OK--spirituality classes and such.

“Initially, I was describing it as so incredibly beautiful. I'm struggling with my fingers to find the right words--love, joy, all those things. But to me it was more profound than that. It was bigger than all of that. It's not that those words don't apply. It's that they are too small. How can you say love's not big enough?”

This comment prompted me to ask Holly if she had a sense of what God is. “I can give you a trite answer and I can give you a profound answer. Both are, of course, tempered by my experiences since 1981. I don't know that I've met God. There was an authority level to that one being, but I don't know if that was God. My sense was that it



was some hierarchical-level being but not necessarily the Big Guy or the Big Goddess or whoever. God is the sunrise over the Rockies. God is a baby's first smile. God is all those things. And yet, the term 'God' implies a personality or a persona to this connectedness and I know it's bigger than a persona. That's why, when I say this entity I communicated with did have a persona of some type and authority level [it could have been God]--but to me, what we're talking about here in the spiritual [realm] is bigger than a god.

“God is more than energy. It's how the energy moves between all things and all beings, and every atom and neutron and electron and proton. It is a pervasive energy--and 'energy' is an inadequate word. We use it because it's semantically the best word we have to talk about the interconnected flow between things. I don't have the words for it but I do have a sense of it from my experience, yes, a very real tangible sense of it. When I watch a bird fly, I *am* that bird. When I smell the grass when it's mowed, I *am* that grass. That is the deeper spirituality. It is more than a god.

“I am a profoundly spiritual person now. I have a lot more understanding. I have an immense appreciation for what I don't know and an immense curiosity, but in its own time. I no longer have that sense of urgency. I now know that time is infinite in a way that I never could have known before. I now know that when my first child was born, I had known her forever and yet she was a brand new being. I know that when I pass, there will be things that I know there that I don't know in this world.

“Given that I was not supposed to have lived more than a few years, or ever to have reproduced, and given that I was under so much pain periodically from my illness, it's extraordinary just to be here. It's just wonderful, even when it's bad. Even when it sucks.”

Holly believed that life was extraordinary even when it was bad. I asked if she believed in hell.

“Do I have a sense of hell or evil? You bet. Hell is not a different place than this place. Hell is what we do to each other. It's man's inhumanity to man. And we each get to see various pieces of hell, thanks to the media. I have so many mixed feelings about this because intolerance is what I perceive. I realize how stupid all that is now. You know, if we are all so interconnected and part of this same extension of energy that is God, what kind of way is ethnic cleansing? But I'm also encouraged to see a level of human evolution that's taking place.

“A lot of times, my near-death experience is put over here on the shelf. It's accessible, in that I know I can just pick up the book and it's there. It's an instant, ready resource. But I can't have it in front of me all the time or I would fall down the stairs. It's extremely hard. Unless I were Mother Teresa or someone who could totally devote her life to this spiritual context while on a physical plane, it would be extremely hard. It's easy to be a saint when you live in a monastery. Mother Teresa showed me that the real work of this realm takes place day-to-day.

“I'm blessed. I'm the lucky one. I've got a nice house. I've got enough food to eat. But when I'm so conscious of man's inhumanity to man or abuse of the earth, it's hard to live with. I have to choose my balance like any of us. I'm choosing where I can be effective, right now, and that is as a parent. That is the most important work I can do. That is where I try to put the majority of my energy. Do I speak out on injustice? You bet. Do I do what I can to make the world a little better? I recycle, write letters, and contribute to Amnesty International. I do all the right things. Do I feel they have an effect on the planet? Yes, in that small, humble, insignificant way we talked about earlier.

Maybe I don't know the one tiny little piece I'm going to play. But it's there, and occasionally I feel led to do something that's a little bigger, that's more significant.

I prompted Holly to give me an example of what she considers significant. “One of the things that I had really wanted to do was be active in politics. I used to be socially conscious like a lot of people in our generation. I was much more of an activist. One of the shifts that's taken place in me is the realization that the changes we make that are really significant are not the ones that are out there, but are person-to-person. I'm creating ripple motions by my gestures of kindness. There's that flow of energy moving outward. What will happen with concentric reactions down the line is more significant than any letter I could write about Yugoslavia. My father was right. It's absolutely about kindness. Does that mean I have to be a pushover or a co-dependent? No, it means I have to be able to hold my own truth, my own integrity. It means I have to get out of myself enough to see somebody else for who they are, and hear their truth, and know it's just as valid as mine. When I look at the Serbian president, I can only guess at what his reality is. It's all playing out now, and I have very mixed feelings about our country and me being part of that continuation--even if our intent is to stop it. Are we doing the right thing? I don't know. There's that balance of ambivalence again.”

### Reflection

In Holly's interview, I was exposed to additional portions of Moody's common elements of near-death experiences. These included out-of-body experiences where Holly could look back and view her physical body; communication that occurred by senses other than auditory; a sense of knowing; meeting dead relatives, friends, and pets; having

a choice of whether to stay in the physical or non-physical worlds; and encountering a divine being.

Holly's interview was most dramatic in the detail she used to depict the different reality that composes the non-physical world. She knew that her non-physical state was normal, and "not weird." To her, the non-physical state was "really real," and she understood that at the core of her being. Holly noted that, while in the Light, she felt as if she had arrived home. There was a sense of wholeness. As with Martha, Holly found that being separated from love that is the Light was very painful. She speculated that this separation was the basis for hell, and that hell was no different from "this place," the physical world. My sense is that Holly meant hell is created out of our choices that separate us from God's love.

Both Holly and Martha had described God as being a form of energy. Holly's lengthy description of God as being the essence of both matter and the space between matter further explains why Martha described God as *everything*. Holly reinforced this by telling us that we are all interconnected and part of this same extension of energy that is God. Remember that Martha said that everything we do affects everything else in the universe. This is only possible if everything is interconnected.

For Holly, the non-physical body seemed to be this amorphous energy source that communicated through the exchange of energy. The concept of arms, legs, and hands still seemed to be there, but not in the form that we remember from physical existence. Both Martha and Holly felt that this switch from the physical body to the energy body was freeing.

The non-physical world seemed not to be connected to the physical emotions created while in the body. Holly described her separation as being detached emotionally

from her prior life and prior body. It was as if there was some barrier not allowing emotions from the physical to enter the non-physical world. I became curious about the various boundaries, levels, and spaces that composed the non-physical world. In particular, I noted that there were places where the Light was and was not.

Like Martha, Holly made references to the non-physical world existing outside time. The concept of a future or past didn't seem relevant. These were concepts not contemplated in the non-physical world. Thought, then, did not exist as we know it, with its emphasis on the present. Holly noted that because of this, linear thinking made little sense.

The lessons Holly was trying to incorporate into her life were to be kind (a version of to be loving), be present, be accepting (non-judgmental), be open to being led, and be conscious about our person-to-person relationships. This last lesson was the critical job of humans.

These lessons were reinforced by the accessibility of the near-death experience's loving energy. This energy seemed close at hand, and Holly could call on it at will. She could remember it during trying circumstances to bolster her resolve. She could call on it to guide her day. Holly felt her mission here on Earth revolved around how she made her choices out of all the options available.

Balancing choices between the demands of the physical world and the pull of the non-physical world was a very conscious exercise. Holly did a good job of delineating when she was fully here in the physical and when she needed to pull the near-death experience book off the shelf for the energy and knowledge that it bestowed. She knew that she could not live well being fully immersed in the physical or fully immersed in the non-physical. She understood that some balance needed to be maintained. What I found

of particular interest was how she equated judging with blocking of energy. I understood that judgments hinder our ability to be open to the love that is God and the direction provided.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Zachary*

“I was in God, and He was in me.”

--*Zachary*

Zachary died a horrible death. Working in the oil fields of Wyoming, he was burned when a tanker truck exploded. As he entered the Light, he found himself floating in a river of cream, cradled in the hand of God. This contrasting image--that of a hard life and horrible transition with that of a gentle near-death experience--gave me cause to examine the notion of “you get what you need.”

Zachary’s descriptions of being held in the hand of God and what he understood to be the nature of God lent support to the notion of interconnectedness described by Martha and Holly. Similarly, Zachary’s life was dramatically marked by separation. His longing for reunion defined what was important to him in his new life and what he looked for in human institutions. Zachary’s themes both reinforced and enlightened my understanding of near-death experiences.

Zachary and I arranged an evening meeting in downtown Mankato. The pastor of the church of my youth, First Presbyterian, was kind enough to allow us to use its comfortable library for the interview. I arrived early to find Zachary already there waiting for me. A man of average height and build in his mid-30s, Zachary had scarring on one side of his face and neck. I wondered to myself if it was associated with his near-death experience. We seated ourselves at the lone library table, he at the head and I at the

corner to his right. This positioning seemed more personal than sitting across from each other. It also afforded me a better chance to observe his body language. I welcomed him to the research process. His language, both verbal and nonverbal, showed that he was curious but closed. I eased into the conversation by talking about the winter storm in progress and the slippery driving conditions. After a bit, his shoulders relaxed and he turned toward me in a gesture of acceptance. That's when the interview began in earnest. I thanked Zachary for participating. After getting my tape-recorder set up, I went through the customary preparatory remarks and paperwork for the interview. Upon completion of these tasks, I asked Zachary to describe the situation in which he found himself at the time of his near-death experience, including both outer events and inner thoughts.

### *Zachary's Story*

“I was born and raised in the West, out in Wyoming. I was 21 and working at the time in the oil field. I worked for a small contractor operating a number of tank trucks and some heavy equipment. I did a little of everything. On the day of the accident, it was very cold. In one of the tank trucks that was supposed to be a water-only truck, someone had picked up a load of crude oil on top of the already-present water. I came on duty to drive the truck and found that they had left the valve in the back of the truck closed. The valve was frozen up. Not aware of the oil in the truck, I was thawing the valve with a propane torch when it blew up and I was burned. I don't even know now the percent of my body that was burned, but I was burnt pretty bad. It was in the hospital, a burn center at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, that I experienced a near-death experience.”

There was a long pause. It took me a minute to realize that Zachary was finished telling his story. Obviously, Zachary was a man of few words. I realized that I would



have to draw his story out of him with questions. I started by asking what the burn center was like.

He responded easily. “When I got to the hospital in Salt Lake City, I was beginning to come out of the haze a little bit and realize how badly I’d been injured. The first night I was there, the main doctor asked me if I wanted to see a priest. I said, ‘No, not particularly. Why?’ He said, ‘Well, are you Catholic?’ And I said, ‘No, I’m not. I’m a Baptist, actually.’ He said, ‘Well, we can get a Baptist minister to see you if you’d like.’ And I said again, ‘No, not especially. Why?’” Chuckling to himself, he continued. “You know, I was a little slow on the hint there. Then he finally just said flat out, ‘I don’t know if you’re going to make it through the night.’ I was shocked. I hadn’t really thought that I was possibly going to die.”

Because we were recording this conversation, I asked him to describe his injuries, noting he had some burn marks on his forehead. He obliged. “My arms were also burned. Most of the blast hit me about stomach high in the belly button area. It blew me backwards like this, spread eagle, like a bird. My palms were out. The insides of my arms and upper body were burned and I apparently turned sideways during the blast.”

I commented that I could see a little bit of scarring on his left ear. He nodded. “It got the left side of my head more than it did the right side. I must have landed like this, because I broke my right shoulder, probably on impact when I landed. I had a lot of clothing on and it pretty much burned my clothes off. It burnt on my stomach all the way to the muscle. That was what they were primarily concerned with, because all the skin and fat layers were gone. The burn was over all of my upper abdomen. I don’t know what all transpires in your body when you’re burned like that. It must have put me into critical condition.

“Within that first few days that I was in the burn center in Utah, I had an incredible sense of closeness to God. Now, I was raised in a fundamental Baptist-type church. They’re kind of a hell-fire type group. When I was in high school, I did the things they say to do to be born again. I put it that way because I’m not all that certain now exactly how that all works, but I did what they said to do. I got pretty fired up about religion for a while. That faded out, and by the time I got out of high school, I was pretty much into smoking pot, drinking beer, partying, and working in the oil field--pretty much acting like an oil field guy, running with that whole rowdy crowd and that whole scene. Before oil, I worked in the mines. I ran heavy equipment.

“I pretty much forgot all about religion. Didn’t even want to admit that I’d ever been a church kind of a person for a while there. I wouldn’t be caught dead in a church. But yet, I suppose that you never really completely leave that. There was a verse of scripture that I learned somewhere along the line that said, ‘Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.’ During the time in the hospital, I was really drawn near to God. I mean, I was scared, you know? Put it plain and simple. I was really frightened, especially after that doctor told me I might not make it. That really frightened me, to be advised to see a minister--because you may not be around tomorrow. That really took me back.

“I did see a minister. It’s kind of weird because this guy just came in, and he looked very uncomfortable.” Chuckling, he continued, “I don’t know if they just picked him out of a phone book or what. He fumbled a little bit, said a prayer, and left. Not a lot of consolation there. But, in my mind, I was really praying a lot, asking God for something. Anything. It was during that time--it’s hard to explain--but I felt as though I was right there, laying right there in the hand of God. I know it sounds kind of crazy maybe, but that’s the best I can do. Now I will describe something that is only adequate.

No, it's inadequate. It's the best I can do at creative description. I did go to college and I did major in English after I got out of this experience. I've done a little of descriptive efforts there.

“I was in a foam rubber canoe or raft, sitting in a river of milk or cream. Lying there, everything was white. It was very peaceful. To get to the other side, I just had to shove off the shore just by a little bit. It would easily float right over there. Then God said, ‘No. Not now.’ Did I hear a voice? No, not exactly. I was there and I was looking at the other side. I didn’t see a person. I didn’t see God per se, just white. The sense was peaceful, very peaceful. And very good, you know, very--I don't know, how would you say – uncrowded, perhaps. It was just me and what I believed to be God in this place. It was so easy to just shove off and coast over to this other side. Then came this inner sense of ‘not now’ or ‘not yet,’ or ‘wait’ or something like that. I didn't give that little push, you know. I could have just . . . .” Zachary motioned with his arm, palm out, pushing the raft softly away. “Just like that and I would have been across.” It took 10 full seconds for his hand to traverse one foot in the air. I got the feeling that almost no effort would have been required to move to the other side. His words and gestures suggested incredible softness.

Zachary abruptly broke the mood by saying, “But I didn't do it. And then it kind of ended. I don’t have much beyond that. It wasn't like I just suddenly woke up from a dream or anything like that. It just seemed like it went on. Throughout this time in the burn center, that feeling of being in the hand of God continued. That stayed with me for maybe a good week or two, I'd say. That was an incredible experience. I was in God and God was in me. He was holding me there. And this . . . .” Zachary’s voice hitched. He looked down, overcome with emotion. I gently urged him to continue.

“OK, I'll go just a little bit. With each day that I got better physically, I got less spiritual. That's caused me a lot of anguish in my spiritual life because I've always sought this relationship again with God. I never have quite found it. Not like that. Not like being in the palm of His hand. I'm not sure I want to. If it means being close to death to get there, I'm not sure I want to get there. You know what I mean? You always kind of want that. Man, something there was so real, so intense, and yet I can't get it back. Not like that anyway.” Zachary was finding it difficult to touch that place again. The pain of his wistfulness was so strong that I could feel the ache.

After a pause to compose himself, Zachary continued. “There was a real sense of softness, buoyancy, and gentleness. It's trying to find that again that's frustrating. I'm trying to explain something that I can't explain really. It transcends my language ability.”

Referring to my notes, I asked Zachary when God asked him to wait, and if he truly had a choice.

“Yes, at the time it did seem optional. It didn't so much after. I would say it was almost a draw. There was almost a pull to cross over the stream. You know, it looked very appealing to shove off, so to speak. And, I believed I was making that decision, to push off. Then God told me to wait.”

Zachary smiled and chuckled to himself. “It seemed very likely that you should take God's advice when He tells you something. You'd be wise to do it. Probably I could have pushed off to the other side. I don't know that that thought crossed my mind after the ‘Wait.’ I don't know that I ever did question or say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ at that point. I don't think I did.”

Zachary went on to describe the river of cream. “I was in a place of great whiteness. There were different textures involved. It seemed as though I was in one

place, and there was another place to step across--or to fly across, jump across, float across. The milky river was not big. I'm trying to find the right earthly term as small as a step, or maybe a long step. It was not a lot. It wasn't like there was any major effort to get there. Just the smallest of efforts could have taken me there. Like popping a bubble."

I asked where God was.

"Everywhere, I would say. I didn't have a sense that He was in one spot. Now, see, I've read some books where they saw a being in a tunnel and Light at the end. I didn't really see a tunnel with Light at the end. I don't know as though I ever saw an actual person or even what I would call a 'being.' It seemed that God was there, but it was like everything was God. It was an 'I-was-in-Him-and-He-in-me' type of a thing."

If God was everywhere and everything, I wanted to know what qualities the Light had. Zachary did his best to explain.

"I would describe it as like the essence of purity. I don't know how accurate that was, or if that did it justice or not. It just seemed like friendliness, in the ultimate sense of the word. Just purity. Like it was a place or a person of just unequalled purity. I guess I can't think of another word, another synonym, to go along with that.

"I'd say that there were two places there. Two distinct places. And yet the place was just completely bathed in or absorbed in or saturated with this Light. That's the best I can come up with. I know that my description lacks, but it held incredible peace. Incredible. I've experienced nothing like it before or since."

Following up on this theme, I asked if he sensed other emotions.

"I would say awe, or in some ways, surprise. Something like peace, but not exactly peace. That's the dominant thing I would associate it with. If you look at the physical world, sometimes it looks very confusing or very frustrating. Do you ever get

just frustrated with things? Confused, and Why is this like this?" I nodded in agreement. Zachary continued, "I mean, even simple things. Simple, simple things sometimes can be so maddeningly out of place. Whatever this place was, it was not like the physical world! It was as opposite of that as anything can be. It was rightness, you know? The world of white was the way-it-should-be type of place." Zachary was very clear on this point.

I wondered if this distinction occurred to him while he was in the near-death experience. To draw him out, I asked what he was thinking about during the near-death experience.

Zachary paused and replied haltingly. "At the time, life was completely forgotten. I wasn't thinking anything about life--not being burned, not being in the hospital, not how I was going to pay the bills. None of this," adding parenthetically that this was what people thought about in the burn center, just lying there, being burned. "But at that time, all of that was gone. It was completely out of the mind. Gone. You're looking at the next place, you know. You're looking at the other side, so to speak. I mean, the worries were just nothing." Musing, he continued, "I mean it's just nothing. That stays with you in a way. Of all the things that I thought about, that's one that stayed with me, perhaps more than anything. And all of this is nothing."

"If I think about it, it gets to me. Like, 'What did you do this for?' But, yeah, it's nothing. You know it's really not important."

I asked Zachary what other kinds of after-effects he noticed from his experience.

Zachary brightened at being able to tell this chapter of his story. "Well, I went on a real religious zealot phase. I went to a Bible college near here, in Mapleton. I think they're a well-meaning bunch, but I don't think they've got it quite. I found that to be a really very frustrating experience because I felt like I'd been in the hand of God. I didn't

think that the fundamental Baptist Bible college really had the answer that I was looking for. I was looking for something that I don't know that any religion has. I was looking to get back in the hand of God, to recreate that relationship with God, that closeness. I don't really think that religion does that for people. Maybe it does, but I haven't found it yet. Anyone is free to disagree, but I think religions, each one of them, play to a certain group of society, not unlike stores of different kinds.”

I asked how Zachary had changed as a result of having a near-death experience.

“I completely changed where I was going in life. Before my near-death experience, I wanted to work and make it to quitting time. I liked to have a few drinks or smoke some pot. I got into that. Liked it too, the whole thing that went with it. Thought it was quite the life. After I got burned and out of the hospital, I saw life completely different. I went to Capland Bible College. I was thinking about going into some kind of ministry and I still might. I can't say that I wouldn't consider that as an option. I guess I got disillusioned with all the things I saw as ‘ministry,’ and then I waited for the call, so to speak. They always talked that if you’re going to be a preacher, you should be called by God. Maybe that's kind of bogus, and maybe it's not. But I never really felt that I was called. I kept waiting for God to tell me.

“People always tell you after something like this, ‘Well, you wait and see. God is going to do something great through this.’ So I was waiting for this great thing to happen. It never did, or hasn't yet. Or maybe it has. Maybe all my life is the great thing that happened.”

I wanted to follow up on Zachary’s “all is nothing” comment that came sometime after he had been cradled in the hand of God. I asked him when he began to realize that stuff on earth is just not important.

Zachary corrected me. “There are things on this earth that *are* important, but they're not snowmobiles and motorcycles and four-wheelers and--if you want to get into the more white-collar thing--season tickets to the Guthrie. They're nice. They're fun. There's nothing wrong with them. But they're not what you live for. Friends, family, children are what is important. Now I'm married. I have two kids. They're all important. Doing things--actually doing things for people, not because you think you should but because they're in need or just because you can--that's important. I've got a neighbor, and no telling why, but he shovels my walk down to the end. I live on the corner. And he always comes down to the corner when he shovels.”

Zachary gave other examples. “I saw a guy down by the grocery store one time. I know the guy was just a bum that probably got off a train or something. I gave him some money. It's a small thing but he didn't have any. What's important is to do good deeds. Do things for people. Make the world a better place somehow. I've got a student that I tutor at the community center, trying to get a GED. I would have never done that before my near-death experience. I would have never given a bum money before. I'm sure I wouldn't have done any more snow shoveling than I had to.”

Riding Zachary's wave of enthusiasm, I pressed him about why he was inspired to act this way.

“It's just the only thing that there is. It's almost like the only way you can act in a sense, because you know your time is limited. I feel like this life is a gift. It's so very easy to lose, and when that happens, it's over. If you're going to do something with your life, you'd best be getting to it.”

His comment begged the question: If life is so precious, was he afraid to die?



“I don't believe I am. I'm afraid more of the process of dying. I would not want to get cancer. I wouldn't want to be sick for months, years, maybe. That's just misery. Death itself, no. I don't feel at all afraid of that. But when I think of God as defined by the various churches and religions I've been involved with over my lifetime here, the fundamental movement especially, the prospect of dying is scary. When I think of Him relative to my experience, no. That I don't fear *at all*. I was certainly no saint before my near-death experience happened. I was at my worst when that happened. I found my near-death experience to not be frightening at all. It was, in fact, a thing to be desired. I liked being given the options.”

After this last statement, Zachary seemed ready to wrap things up, so I asked if there was anything else he wanted to tell me about his near-death experience.

He nodded, going back to the frustration of knowing that his life was spared, but not knowing for what purpose. “I've often wondered how something could be so real at one point and then just seem like there was nothing there. Sometimes, it doesn't even seem like there is a God. Like when you get really frustrated with things and you feel like you're not getting your goals achieved. You're not even sure what you want to do. I'm almost 40 years old and I haven't really decided what I want to do when I grow up. Was I really meant to bend sheet metal? Is that why I was told to wait? So then you question. Was I really told to wait, or did I just dream this? You know, it's very frustrating, very confusing. I think about that,” he confided.

“Life has this way of dragging you into it. You have an experience that seems to transcend life itself, and in some sense, put everything into a focus. But then, it's back to reality.”

## Reflection.

I will never forget Zachary's description of how he left his seared body to enter a world of white, floating in a foam canoe on a river of cream. The contrast between his non-physical world and his physical existence/death was so dramatic that I had to take notice. I was struck by the theme of Martha's story, where she needed to learn the lessons contained in her dark shapes to gain new perspectives, and the theme of Holly's story, where she needed to die three times in order to embrace life. What lesson did Zachary need to learn? He needed to experience another way of being in order to envision another kind of life. Zachary depicted his experience as being informed, of bringing everything into focus. I'm beginning to recognize that the near-death experience heals lives by giving participants experiences, new options from which to choose in order to live life more fully.

The essence of the Light that Zachary called "purity" offers more clues to a fully realized life. The peace that eluded him as an oilfield rowdy presented itself in the Light. As God held him in his protective hand, Zachary encountered purity of alignment between his life and the rightness of God's love. "I was in Him and He was in me," he said. Zachary became one with the purity of God. No wonder Zachary described the Light as a place *and* a person. Boundaries slip away in the non-physical universe.

Zachary's longing to reunite with God's energy defined his life back in the physical. His experience changed his view about organized religion and about what his occupation should be. Zachary was dissatisfied with both. However, he found great solace in what he considered to be important in his life: family, doing things for people, and the impact of one-on-one encounters, however brief. This aligned nicely with Holly's view of what is important in life. Zachary also found that exposure to transcendence was

not a model for how to live in the physical. Like Holly, he found that he needed to “get back to life” and still remember the feeling of being in the hand of God. That memory is only a pinprick on a soap bubble away.

Zachary mentioned two types of boundaries. The “soap bubble” analogy between the physical and non-physical worlds implied that the boundary was very thin. It could disappear in an instant with very little effort. Holly described this phenomenon as being able to pick up a book on the shelf anytime she wanted. The second type of boundary is that between the near-death experience and a permanent stay in the non-physical. In Zachary’s case, this meant crossing a river of cream several feet wide. These differentiations between spaces indicated to me that the near-death experience was indeed a transition experience. I would look for other boundaries in future interviews.

I have found that all the interviews so far have contained a similar component: that the near-death experience is a glorious, loving, and healing experience. There is no doubt why Zachary is not afraid of death.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

John

“I saw [the Virgin Mary] appear. Everything became peaceful right then.  
I found a great peace. I wasn’t upset that I was shot.  
I wasn’t upset that I was 7,000 miles away from home.  
I wasn’t obsessed that I was laying on a riverbank covered in mud and blood.”  
--*John*

John was a Viet Nam veteran who was shot in the leg and abdomen while on ambush duty just after the Tet offensive in 1968. His story is important because it further reinforces the “designer” nature of the near-death experience. It also hints at the intelligence of the Light and helps me understand how experiencers’ decisions to go or stay can be made without verbal, linear thought patterns. John brought back a unique set of lessons that he has successfully incorporated into his life. Chief among them was the conscious work that must be done to renegotiate every phase of his life after a near-death experience.

John’s interview took place during another bitterly cold night in January 1999. The wind was whipping the falling snow into such a fog that driving was problematical at best. With confusing directions, being unable to see, and driving through bumper-high snowdrifts, it was slow going. I arrived a half an hour late. John lived in the country. His house was an extended rambler snuggled against a large windbreak of aspen and pine trees. The gale-force winds dropped to a mere breeze as I approached the house and negotiated my way around snowdrifts and an overly friendly black Lab chained to the porch railing. John greeted me at the door and quickly ushered me into the mudroom to

take off my considerable layers. As I did so, I noticed that John's home had a decidedly male feel about it. Guy gear was spread all over and in various states of disrepair. As we entered the living room, we encountered a slouched male teenager studying a textbook with headphones on, stereo playing and the TV blaring. John suggested that we find a quieter place to conduct our interview. I quickly agreed and he ushered me into a library off the main bedroom. Before I even got to the preliminaries, John started talking rapidly. It was clear that he was happy to participate in this interview.

"I have told this story to very few people, probably less than ten in my life," he said. "I think I've told my wife. I think I've told my kids, some of them. I don't tell it because I don't think most people would believe it and or be interested."

After such a wonderful lead-in, I sincerely expressed my interest and thanked him for his enthusiasm. I then asked him to hold off for a few minutes until I could get fully set up and complete some necessary paperwork. John indicated that he worked for the government and understood completely about paperwork. I thanked him again for participating. After getting my tape-recorder set up and going through the paperwork for the interview, I asked him to describe the situation in which he found himself at the time of his near-death experience, including both outer events and inner thoughts.

### John's Story

John's delivery was rapid-fire. He reminded me of Joe Friday on the television show "Dragnet," whose famous refrain was, "Just the facts, Ma'am."

John began with the facts. "OK. At the time I had my near-death experience, I was 19 years old and in the United States Army 101st Airborne Division. I was part of the 502nd Infantry of Company D, stationed in the northern part of South Vietnam, about

20 miles south of the demilitarized zone. I was an infantryman in the Army in the above-named organization. I was a sergeant E-5 at the time. I was a squad leader. We had just finished the Tet offensive of 1968, which was all wound down by then. Basically, we were doing search and reconnaissance missions--go out and chase the enemy. I belonged to a very aggressive organization commanded by a very aggressive colonel. You had to be aggressive in that type of situation. There were two kinds of soldiers over there, the quick and the dead. At that time, we were having intermittent contact with the enemy--maybe once every two days, sometimes three or four days straight, then three or four days, nothing. But we were pushing all the time.

“We were guarding a bridge on the Song Bee River. What I mean by ‘guarding a bridge’ is that we were sitting at a bridge that had strategic value to it, but it was used as a resting area. We were rotated to this bridge about every three weeks. You had to come back in from the field, sit down, eat some good food, get more than two and a half hours’ sleep at night, let your feet dry out, get some new equipment, bring in new replacements, and just relax, get drunk, whatever.

“Well, our time at this bridge was up and another company was ready to rotate in. We marched north along the Song Bee River for, I’d say, two miles. We were moving toward the mountains, through Savannah vegetation. We stopped for the night to set up camp. As we were setting up, the platoon leader called me. He said, ‘It’s your night to go out on ambush.’ It was the policy of each platoon to send out one squad per night to pull ambush. That means that we would go out, wait along a trail for the enemy to come along, and aggressively engage them in the middle of the night--at very close quarters.

“We’re going down a trail. I was leading. We were probably advanced 100 yards. Something stopped me. I smelled something. I stopped. I can *still* smell this smell. It was

another person. I knew it was a Vietnamese because they smell different than we do. They use a different tobacco, they have a different diet, and so they smell different. He was close, so close I could smell him. The man right behind me, a very experienced infantryman, though not as experienced as me--walked right into me, clunk. He whispered, 'What's going on?' I said, 'Somebody is so close I can smell him.' And we just waited for perhaps one minute. We were ready and we were tense. We had the rifles on fully automatic, pointing out. Everybody else had stopped. I whispered back to Ramón, 'I don't know if they're here or just walked through ahead of us. But somebody, somethin', has been here really close.' We advanced ten more feet and were under fire. I was immediately hit. I cannot remember if I returned fire or not.

"I was laying there on the trail, face up, bleeding. A member of my patrol was putting field dressing on me. By 'field dressing' I mean a cotton pad about four inches by six, about the size of a post card, with four strings so it could be tied into position. They were trying to put these on me, front and left. While I was lying there, I was also praying--reciting the 'Act of Contrition,' the 'Hail Mary,' the 'Our Father,' the prayer before meals." Laughing at the memory, he continued. "I prayed *anything* that came to mind, alternating between swearing and sucking on whatever pop or drinking water we had along. The fluid was runnin' out of me as fast as I was puttin' it in. I was beyond caring.

"All of a sudden, off to my left, I saw this Light appear. It was not like any Light that I can describe. It was a very brilliant Light. It started out small and it became larger as it approached me. In the outline, inside this aurora of Light, I saw the figure of a woman dressed as the Virgin Mary. I could not see facial features. I could not tell the color of the robe. It looked like a silhouette. But it was in the manner that the Virgin is usually depicted--the headdress, the flowing robe very similar to a nun, but not. I saw this

apparition appear. To me, everything became peaceful right then. I found a great peace. I wasn't upset that I was shot. I wasn't upset that I was 7,000 miles away from home. I wasn't obsessed that I was laying on a riverbank covered in mud and whatever, blood. A great peace came over me.

"I could see *in the dark*. I could *see* the men in my squad--Ramón, Don, Arturo, Gale, and all the rest of my men, seven or eight in number. They were kind of huddled up, looking in, looking out, and then kind of stealin' a glance back, you know, lookin' at me. Everybody was nervous, apprehensive, spooked, jumpy--whatever your emotions would be, going through something like that, in the dark night, with a whole lotta shootin' goin' on, trying to get to a safe area, trying to care for a wounded man at the same time. So, while I was lying there in the blackness and seeing this Light, it got brighter. Nobody else seemed to be mindful of this Light; nobody else seemed to know the Light was there. I could see them perfectly clear, just as clear, if not clearer, than you and me sittin' right here. We were beyond daylight. We were way beyond daylight.

"Although they were still in darkness, they were perfectly outlined to me. I could see every detail. There were white guys and black guys and Mexicans there. There was everything. I could see them all. I could see all their coloration," he assured me. "I could see the apprehensiveness in their face and everything was clear to me. But it was not clear to them. They were shining this flashlight on me. I could see some of them lighting cigarettes. There was a lot of talking goin' on. Our cover had been blown. The enemy knew we were there."

Breaking from the battle scene, John told me more about the vision. "It was a Light that came from my upper, beyond me to the left. It seemed to be up in the sky, and as it came toward me, it got bigger and bigger. As I watched it coming, I could discern



my name being called, 'John, John.' As it got closer, the voice became a little louder. Then, I could see it was a woman, and this peace broke out over me. It felt like--it felt all right. I knew I was injured. I knew this. I thought to myself, 'I'm going to heaven. I'm gonna die, right now.' I'd never heard of a near-death experience, but I knew I was going to die because I was being sent for. I was being called home.

"I believed that this was the Virgin Mary because of the manner of her dress, the gentleness of her voice. There wasn't an urgency in it. It was just a peaceful, 'John,' in a very feminine voice, speaking English to me, calling my name. The area was bathed in this brilliant Light. She seemed to be above the ground but contained within this aurora. I resolved that I was going to die right then. And I wasn't upset that I was going to die.

"All of a sudden, she just stopped. There was no 'hello' or 'good-bye' or anything, just my name being called several times. Then the vision started to recede. Just as it had grown when it first approached us, it did the same thing--it got smaller as it moved away. There was nothing else said. My name was not called again. The vision just got smaller, dimmer, gone. That was the end of it, and I knew right then that I was going to live. There was no doubt in my mind that I was going to live."

John stayed with this thought for a moment, and then jumped ahead a few years. "I told this story to a lady connected with the Lutheran church who was studying to be a pastor. After listening to this story, she said to me, 'I don't think it was the Virgin Mary.' I said, 'Why? What makes you think that?' And she said, 'I don't think it was the Virgin Mary because the Virgin Mary isn't sent out all the time. She's kind of reserved for very special people. Ha. Ha.' She went on to explain, 'You're special, but I don't think you're that special, because death comes to everybody. I think that was your Guardian Angel.' I thought about it for a moment and said to her, 'You know, I agree with you, now that I

stop and think about it. It was my Guardian Angel.' I believed this because we all have a Guardian Angel, whether we acknowledge it or not. I know this to be the truth because it was taught to me in Catechism. As I was lying there wounded, I was probably praying the Guardian Angel prayer," he said, clarifying his initial recollection.

"One of the 16 prayers you were praying at the moment?" I interjected, both teasing him and confirming his ardor.

"Right, *yeah*, off and on, you know. I believe that the vision I received was of my Guardian Angel who, when you die, returns back to heaven with you--or perhaps if you go the other way, he returns to heaven and you go someplace else. That was the vision I thought about, intermittently, over the last 30-some years."

I was upset for John that someone in a position to influence had denied him his vision. I trusted his initial impression of the vision as the Virgin Mary because he had described it in exclusively feminine terms. John changed the gender of the vision to male when he mentioned his Guardian Angel. I made a note to ask him about this apparent contradiction later. I asked him to return to the story.

"The rescue platoon came and I was evacuated by the helicopter, which flew in from perhaps two and a half hours away. It was a 20-minute ride to the field hospital and another 15 minutes before the doctors did triage. They cut off my clothes, brought out a five-gallon pail of hot water, dumped it all over me, cut the boots off me, started to catheterize me, and stuck in an I.V. This guy was charged with getting me scrubbed down. I was a really dirty person, showin' up in the operating room all full of mud. It was in my hair and all over. He told me to identify myself. Then he asked me some questions: 'What's your name, social security number, and Army serial number? Do you want to ask me some questions? Do you want anybody? Do you want a telegram sent?' I told him I

wanted to send a telegram to my mother. I recited the address and he said, ‘OK, we’re going to take it from here. You’re going to sleep right now. Watch the I.V.’ They put the needle in and bingo, I was out.

“I woke up, looked up, and there was this black guy standing over me. I asked him, ‘Am I alive or in heaven?’ He droned, ‘You’re in X-ray. You’re lyin’ on an X-ray machine and I’m takin’ some X-rays.’ We both laugh.

“That’s my story,” John said, ending as abruptly as he had begun.

I told him that it was quite a story and thanked him for sharing it with me. I asked him to go back to his recollection of the Light and try to describe any other qualities that he could remember.

“I would say the Light was a circular fashion. It was lighting up what it needed to have lighted up. It wasn’t light like a flare. In that area of the world, a flare would have poofed all of a sudden, creating instant daylight everywhere. This seemed to be more like a spotlight. It was falling on me and I could see the faces of the people above me, the tops of their helmets bending over me. The texture of the Light was of radiance.

“You know, this Light came from heaven. This was a holy Light. It wasn’t going to hurt your eyes. I don’t think there is a word to describe something like that; it was just like seeing something you’ve never seen before.”

I asked how close the silhouette came to him.

“I would say that it approached no closer than probably 10, 12 feet above us,” John said. “I was lying on the ground, looking up, and I could see it perfectly. The men who were attending to me, doing their protection thing and stealing glances at me because it’s hard not to look, didn’t see the Light at all. It was just for me and not for

them. They didn't need to see it," he concluded. "They'll see their own when their time comes."

I brought the conversation back to the point when he mentioned that he could feel "her vision" on him. I asked him how he sensed that vision.

"Warmth," he replied. "The warmth of peace and contentment. I was gonna die. A vision like that, sent to me, could only mean I was going to heaven. What more could I have wanted? A great peace broke over me and I knew something good was going to happen right then. I told myself, 'I'm going to die. I'm going to heaven, right now, 'cause I've been sent for.' I would have gone if I hadn't fought it."

Surprised, not having a hint of this urge to fight previously, I asked John to describe his fight to stay.

"At that time in my life, I was very aggressive. I was gung-ho. I fought to stay. I considered this choice often: Would it have been a lot better for me if I'd just let go right then? But nobody wants to really let go, even though they get an invitation to go to heaven. If you were 85 years old and your life was spent, your body spent, and your health spent, it'd be all right to go then. It'd be OK to let go."

I wanted to know more about his will to live. I asked him to describe what was going through his head when he made the decision to fight death.

John thought a moment and said, "I don't think I consciously made the decision to stay or not to stay. But, I told my men, 'Don't let me pass out. Slap me, twist my leg, throw water on me, do whatever you have to do to keep me from passing out.' The thought never crossed my mind to just submit and just let go. We were fighting to stay alive. Even when the vision appeared to me, there was no decision--or, I didn't know that

I was making a decision.” John pondered the situation. “Maybe the decision was made on the other side, too. It could have been made non-verbally,” he added.

I steered the conversation to his vision of the Virgin Mary. I wanted to know more about how it had been reinterpreted for him by the Lutheran ministry student. I asked him to describe again what had happened and what had been going on in his head at the time of the vision.

John answered by giving me some background on his religious upbringing and belief system. “Coming from a religious Catholic family, of course I thought, ‘Wow, this is really something.’ And for years, till I talked to that Lutheran lady, I always thought it was the Virgin Mary. This was because of her manner of dress, the blue and white gown, and how she’s usually depicted in our statues, you know, hands extended. They are very seldom depicted with praying hands. She’s usually open-armed,” John explained.

I wondered aloud what kind of an effect this experience had on him.

“I believed in God and heaven and the angels and that type of thing before my near-death experience, and I still do. I never lost my faith. I went through a period when I didn’t attend church regularly, but I never lost my faith. Now, and for many years, I’ve been a faithful churchgoer. I consider myself religious, but I’m not a zealot. I practice a quiet religion. I have an appreciation for a lot of things. I have a good job and I’m fairly wealthy. But I am not concerned with making money in my life.”

Thinking that John was referring to his financial wealth, I asked what he did for a living.

“Right now, I work for Blue Earth County and I make an adequate salary, and I am comfortable. I have a nice house. I have good kids. Although I am separated from my wife and have been for about two years, I’m happy to be here. I’m happy to be alive,

useful. I don't concern myself with having a lot of stuff. If I have enough, that's OK. I'm happy with who I am, now that I'm over 50 and over half way to dead. I appreciate just being able to wake up in the morning. I don't mind if it's summer or winter. I'm happy to get up and go to work. I like my job. I like my co-workers. I pretty well like just about everything around me. All this makes me wealthy."

I asked him how he was different from who he was before the experience.

Forcefully, John stated, "You don't get yourself back. That you gotta go out and work for . . . I think I've always been aware that there are some things in this world that are important, and there are some things that are not. My wife says that I live in sort of a la-la land. That's what she used to call it. 'You don't concern yourself about things that most husbands would concern themselves about,' she would say, referring to sexual relationships. I'm very different in some respect because of the experiences that I went through and because I don't concern myself so much with the 'physical relationships.'

### Reflection

During the introduction to this chapter, I referred to the designer nature of a near-death experience. I found that after four interviews, it became clear that each near-death experience allows the individual to experience what he or she needs to successfully make the transition--or to return to the physical world with the knowledge to live more successfully in the physical realm. What they encounter is tailored to what resonates to them. For John, that was an appearance by the Virgin Mary. This did not occur in any other case I interviewed. The divine mother was the perfect emissary to lend peace and comfort to a severely wounded, 19-year-old Catholic soldier.

I have never been a soldier. I was in college from 1971 to 1975, the last four years of the Viet Nam conflict. My draft year was the first year the military did not take recruits. Having never been in the military or on active duty, I have always wondered how soldiers cope with having to seek out and kill other human beings. I wondered if and how they reconcile killing with their religious or moral beliefs. Although unstated, John seemed to be grateful for the knowledge that he was going to heaven. Even in the madness of war, he understood that he was acceptable, summoned and greeted with open arms by the mother of his savior. That had to have been a powerful experience of grace and connection. It brought a similar peace to that which he experienced in the Light.

What John now deemed important mimics that of the other participants. At the top of their list were children, spouse, and a love of life. Also important was the feeling of usefulness that comes with that family orientation. Like the other near-death experiencers, John denied a concern about money and worldly goods. He considered himself to be a wealthy man because he had the gift of family, friends, and life.

John said, "You don't get your life back. That you gotta go out and work for." These profound words suggested that John worked long and hard to recover from wounds--physical, emotional, and spiritual. He hinted at the reorientation he gained from the near-death experience, something that enabled him to live contently and practice "a quiet religion." I decided to watch for additional evidence of this reorientation in other interviews.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Unity

“We are the experience of the universe.”

*--Dolley*

This chapter identifies the dominant theme of unity and details a model of unity consciousness in the non-physical world. Unity and the non-physical world are contrasted with duality and the physical world. I have constructed the theme of unity in a cumulative fashion using eight ideas:

1. We live in an energetic universe
2. Time is eternal and the nature of God
3. All of creation is one with God and therefore interconnected
4. All of creation is conscious
5. God's energy is love
6. All of creation is as it should be
7. We create our own experiences
8. In unity there is truth

Unlike Castaneda, who had one source (don Juan) of information from which to draw knowledge about nonordinary reality, this study had 23 participants, each with insight and each holding a piece of the near-death puzzle. To organize so much data, my structural analysis drew heavily on the interviews with Martha, Holly, Zachary, and John. It also incorporated the voices of the remaining participants to support and validate the eight ideas that compose unity.



Castaneda's structural analysis was divided into two aspects: the conceptual order, or the matrix of meaning in which all the individual concepts of his teachings were imbedded, and the operative order, or the meaningful sequence in which all the individual concepts of don Juan's teachings were linked to one another. The results of my study paralleled his. The ideas presented in this unity chapter represent the conceptual order and the ideas presented in the next chapter on freedom represent the operative order. The operative order can be thought of as how the experiencer reacted when coming in contact with unity.

The section on unity needs one cautionary note. In describing this concept, I often equate unity with God. Participants used the personal pronoun "He" to describe God. When questioned about this, participants said they never saw God appear to them in any form. Not one could identify the gender of God. The explanation for using this gendered pronoun resides in social convention, habit, and religious training.

### Unity as the Dominant Theme

One dominant theme emerged that significantly affected the formation of experiencers' world view: the almost universal experience of interconnectedness. It played a critical role in establishing new meanings for self, society, and nature.

When near-death experiencers left their physical bodies, they entered, encountered, and engaged a dissimilar universe. This universe behaved differently from the universe with which they were familiar. Descriptions of the qualities of this realm varied, but all shared a general theme. Short descriptions included:

"What we do affects not only ourselves, but also everything in the universe . . . everything and everyone is part of everything else" (Martha)

“Interconnected” (Holly)

“Everything was God” (Zachary)

“All wrapped up in one” (Dolley)

“Connected, whole, oneness . . . everywhere, all places, all times” (Abigail)

“Pervasive . . . completeness, wholeness, oneness” (Julia)

“Limitless” (William)

“We are little parts of the whole . . . that strange sensation of eternity” (Quincy)

The best descriptor arising from these comments on the non-physical universe is the term “unity.” The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines unity as being “the state of being one . . . unity is the fact or condition of being one; in most contexts it implies fundamental agreement of interdependent and usually varied components, which in turn produces harmony” (1975, p. 1401). In this study, experiencers described in various terms, metaphors, and stories a universe in which diverse aspects are interdependent and unified into a connected whole. Although experiencers never used the term “unity,” this designation seems most apt. For me, it identifies the intrinsic nature of the non-physical universe they encountered.

This non-physical universe stands in contrast to the dualistic nature of the physical world. It is defined as “the view that the world consists of or is explicable as two fundamental entities, such as mind and matter . . . the concept that the world is ruled by antagonistic forces” (American Heritage Dictionary, 1975, p. 402). In the dualistic world, perception is contrasted into such concepts as good vs. evil, here vs. there, me vs. you, and light vs. dark. A key to understanding the nature of dualism in the context of this study is the idea of separateness. I am different from you. I am different from the chair. We are not linked in any way. We are separate.

In the unity universe, all aspects are interconnected. This web of connectedness allows all information about all facets of the universe to be available all the time. This interconnection is not physical; rather, it is the energetic foundation out of which physical creation is manifested. With this web as a foundation, near-death experiencers discovered that the non-physical, unity universe operates by a dissimilar set of rules from the physical, dualistic world. Thus, irreconcilable discontinuities occur when the unity universe intersects the dualistic world.

I asked experiencers what it felt like to experience near-death. The following two explanations by Abigail and Julia best approached an empathetic reading. As pointed out in the methodology section, this point of view might allow readers to step outside their normal perspective and imagine the sense of unity. If readers feel it the way I feel it, they may have a sense of coming to center and being everywhere at once. They may feel what it's like to be a leaf from several separate perspectives. Readers may or may not be open to this effort, but this is the way I feel it. I was granted this knowledge as a result of working with participants over the course of this study.

This near-death experience seemed like one big, long connection . . . . There were no boundaries. I was everywhere. That's not easy--it was like there was a center, a reference point. I didn't lose any reference points, but I could have gone anywhere and done anything. It was my mind. My awareness was such that I didn't need my body. I didn't have my body. I think of wavelength--that whole idea of, If you travel fast enough, time stands still. You can be in all places, all times. That's the only way I can think of to do it. You can be everywhere.  
(Abigail)

I can picture in my mind the sensation of connecting to everything, having no boundaries, existing as a central point of consciousness and having awareness of everywhere concurrently. Abigail's mind was the new vessel that was she. Her consciousness controlled what she wished to experience. Time was no factor in the unity

universe. What did it mean to exist outside time? Martha described it as “between time.” This is a difficult concept, one that Julia and other near-death experiencers described as being any-where and any-when. Julia depicted the same feeling as energetic, like a leaf:

Being a leaf felt lacey. It felt energetic. You could feel energy moving through. I could see it from the bottom and I could see it from the top. I could see it and be it and feel it. I mean, there were so many different things going on. I could see my teacher touching my body, I could feel her touching my body, and yet I was up above the trees, and yet I felt like I *was* the trees. It was all happening at the same time and yet separate. It’s so confusing to me as I voice it, but it was an excellent experience. (Julia)

Julia described the experience of multiple and simultaneous consciousnesses.

Martha had the same experience as she relived scenes of her life during her past-life review. Castaneda described his experience this way: “It kindled me. It filled every corner of my body with warmth and directness. Everything was alive. Everything had exquisite and intricate detail, and yet everything was so simple. I was everywhere; I could see up and down and around, all at the same time” (1968, p. 148).

Even my brief exposure to bilocation gave me confirmation that boundaries considered essential to living in the physical world are not a part of the composition of the unity/non-physical world.

Abigail, Julia, and the other experiencers came to understand that there are two distinct universes and that each operates differently. Once identified, explained, and incorporated into their understanding, this knowledge helped to relieve the cognitive and emotional dissonance caused by these inconsistencies. Further appreciation of the assumptions underlying the unity universe helps near-death experiencers accept and articulate the differences.

In describing the cumulative makeup of unity, I am in the same position as Castaneda. He found that nonordinary reality made sense only when viewed from the

perspective of nonordinary reality. Even the following description of the eight foundations of unity, detailed on the following pages, becomes relevant only when the reader steps into this universe in an effort to understand the perceptions of experiencers. Analyzing the unity/non-physical universe using the laws and assumptions of the dualistic/physical universe makes comprehension difficult, if not impossible. As don Juan explained: “You are a man! The protector showed you the world of happiness where there is no difference between things because there is no one there to ask about the difference. But that is not the world of men” (Castaneda, 1968, pp. 152-153).

Again, unity is a whole that is greater than the sum of the following points. However, each of them might be an entryway into fuller understanding of the unity concept.

#### *We Live in an Energetic Universe*

During interviews, experiencers repeatedly described both dualistic and unity universes as based on and constructed with energy. The *American Heritage Dictionary* describes energy as “vigor and power in action” (1975, p. 432). Julia and Holly were quite explicit about this foundation. Martha, Abigail, Quincy, and Thomas in later sections described the universe as “wavelength,” “movement,” “humming,” and “moving.” What is moving is not clear, except imbedded in the very nature and fabric of the universe is energy. Julia described her contact with this energy as divine: “I believe God is a power, a sense of being, of knowing, and I wonder if it isn’t a collective something. Get out of that thought that God is good or bad. It’s just there as energy.”

Holly framed it similarly and expanded the definition:

God is the sunrise over the Rockies. God is baby’s first smile. God is all those things and yet the term “God” implies a personality or a persona to this *connectedness*. It’s more than energy. It’s how the energy moves between all

things and all beings and every atom and neutron and electron and proton. It is a pervasive energy, and 'energy' is an inadequate word.

These two descriptions of energy captured three foundational aspects of unity for me. First, Julia referred to God's sense of being as a collective. It is as if some part of the nature of God is built with the collective consciousnesses of all parts of creation. Holly confirmed this energetic connectedness and struggled with the concept of God as persona, with which Julia agreed. Second, Holly described the energy of God as being the energy that moves between all things. It is the thing that exists and moves between the smallest bits of matter. With her "pervasive" observation, she implied there is not a vacuum between matter, but rather that it is the energy of God that is between matter and from which matter is created. Third, Julia explicitly and Holly implicitly described all this energy that is matter and between matter as "a sense of being, of knowing." They seemed to be describing a conscious energy that does not have a personality. Those who dwell only on our culture's personification of God energy will have a hard time with this concept. The exception is that this vast consciousness of God that Julia described as a collective is composed of and augmented by all of the countless lesser consciousnesses that exist within the unity universe.

### *Time is Eternal and the Nature of God*

In my understanding of the unity universe, "eternal" means that all time is now. All time exists at once. There is no linear time. Therefore, time is a local expression, a concept applicable only in the physical/dualistic universe. This concept is not an easy one for me to incorporate. Linear time is so familiar in the physical world. I know it in every bone of my being and can recite its finite qualities. Linear time has a beginning, middle, and end. I can count it, measure it, and trust in its infallibility. The United States

government and watch manufacturers have teamed up to create clocks and timepieces that are accurate to a billionth of a second.

How can this certainty be just an illusion? I remind myself of Martha and Holly as they encountered the concept of time. In conversation with her teacher/protector Andrew, Martha stated, “I don’t think it was done in time. How can you not do something in time? It was done in between time.” Holly was more certain about this unity version of time. She told me that “there was no sense of future or now or then. It was just this sort of *is*. Was all-present. A place where there wasn't a sense of time dimension.” Asked about the concept of time, other participants had unique descriptors. “Time? How do we tell time up there? Time is just an expression, an enjoyable moment,” said Abraham. Julia responded, “Time? None. It felt like I was there for a long time, but I could still see what was going on down there, too. It was really weird.” Quincy experienced time with a foot in both worlds as he sought to describe the conflicting nature of time between the two universes: “That strange sensation of eternity--I can’t describe--for everything to be completely different in a split second, literally, in a millionth of a second. Yet, I was looking straight ahead and all seemed normal.”

I can understand and feel how difficult it was for them to describe the eternal, non-linear nature of time. The English language lacks adequate words and metaphors to capture this concept. Quincy struggled to describe a sequence of events but made little sense using time-based symbols. Quincy and Julia simultaneously experienced time in the physical world and timelessness in the non-physical realm. Experiencers wondered if déjà vu, the experience of having relived a moment in time, might spring from this phenomenon. The psychic or intuitive talents of precognition or past-life memory seem perfectly plausible given this change in perspective.

Anna was quite certain how time expressed itself in each of the two worlds. Of the unity universe she said, "There is no sense of time." Of the dualistic world she said:

Time is made for man's benefit. Once you leave this realm, you're not with man anymore; you're with spirits, with the Lord. You're on their time, and their time is totally different. Here, time is limited. There, it's for all eternity. I can't prove that, but I know that.

"All eternity" implies that there are no boundaries. Are there any boundaries when addressing the concept of God? William spoke to this when he said:

There is no limit to God. There is no limit. This is nothing that you can say. I'm sure, once we get to heaven, if we've been there a billion years, we're still going to learn facets of God that we never knew before. He is limitless. He has no limits of even the surprises He has for us.

My sense of this limitless and eternal nature of God's energy means that there is no completion. The unity universe, as an energetic body, is continually moving, growing, and under continual creation. Energy must move; it must flow. It is here that I began to understand the distinction between Martha's sense of the void and her sense of emptiness. She said: "The emptiness terrifies me because there's nothing there, absolutely nothing. You can have a void and still have something in it. Emptiness is nothing, absolutely nothing. It even goes past nothing."

My awareness of the void is that there is no form, but an energetic vibration from which anything can be created. This is the realm of unmanifested potential.

Contrastingly, in emptiness, there is stillness, completion, and death. To experience emptiness means to experience something outside of the energy that is God. Martha found this concept terrifying.

*All of Creation is One with God and therefore Interconnected*



With the unity universe having its foundation in limitless energy, experiencers articulated their belief that God energy is interconnected. Each bit is in communication with every other bit. All is one in God. Dolley described her experience this way:

I was in a mountain/meadow/woods combination. It's all wrapped up in one. All of it. Instead of traveling to go to this area, or seeing the mountains or seeing the sky, it's all there. You're within it. I don't know how to describe it. It's just--it's all there.

I began to see that interconnectedness did not mean separate bits communicating with each other; rather, it meant that each bit of the universe contained within it all other bits of the universe. Unfolding for me was the understanding of Dolley's opening statement in this chapter, "We are within the experience of the universe." We must then be within God and in unity with everything else in the universe. Martha puts it more plainly and powerfully. She identifies both the unity nature of the universe/God with the unity nature of time. She said: "God is where I get my hugs. He's everything. How do you explain God? He is all that has been, that is now, and that will be."

I've come to understand that all things physical and non-physical are differentiated manifestations of this eternal energy that is God. My experience in the physical/dualistic world tells us that a human is different from a chair. God is different from a blade of grass. Experiencers have come to know that they are both. They are at one with everything and separate from chairs and grass. Julia described this sense of individuality within unity:

I felt as if I had a completeness, a sense of wholeness that I had not had previously and I haven't had since this sense of oneness. I still had a sense of I-ness, a sense of me, and I was part of something greater and was beginning to understand things.

She later explained it from another perspective:

I felt like I was one with the trees and one with the stars . . . . I do believe that we're all just forms of energy . . . . I was looking, feeling. I was the energy running through that leaf or the energy running through the leaf was my energy as well. It was like The Collective. I feel like I'm talking about Star Trek! (Laughs)

I received two additional comments about the interconnected nature of God's unity universe. The first came from Quincy and addressed the generative nature of the universe: "I do believe there is a creator, a creative force that has particular directions it wants to move things in and we're all little parts of a whole." The second perspective stretched me. Just when I was getting used to the idea that multiple conscious perspectives exist, Dolley intrigued me with the concept of additional dimensions. She said, "God is the universe. Not just one universe. He is all around you."

Julia confirmed that we are both separate from and a part of the unity universe. Our energy is linked to and flows with everything in the universe. Quincy added that this universal force has consciousness. He believed that consciousness has a plan. Dolley called that consciousness "God" and indicated that there is a multidimensional nature to our universe(s). Holly clearly accepted the idea that we are all part of God. However, she struggled with the idea that what is manifested in the dualistic universe is also of God. Holly was troubled by the conflicting notion that God is everything and that God's plan can allow such heinous acts as genocide. Wrenching conflict arises as near-death experiencers attempt to embrace the precepts of the two universes.

### *All of Creation is Conscious*

Once I determined that all of creation is energetic, eternal, and interconnected, experiencers identified that this interconnection is alive and conscious. In this consciousness is contained knowledge and understanding. When Martha was meditating on her porch, she offered the following reflections:

I could feel the wood of the railing humming and the colors. It still had life. Amazing. I looked outward and for a time I felt connected. I then understood that I was there to learn. To see how everything and everyone is part of everything else.

Zachary picked up on the interconnected part, and added, “Just seemed like it was a place or a person of just unequaled purity.” With all aspects of the non-physical being unified, the description of this space as both a place and a person seems appropriate. Both are interconnected, and the addition of a person lends credence that this state has intelligence. Abraham went further:

We all seemed to have one mind. Whatever we were thinking, we all thought that together. It seemed like everything that came into the light was answered. If you started thinking about something, the answer was there before you finished asking the question.

Abigail was of similar mind:

I felt more alive than I ever felt in my whole life. I didn’t feel dead at all. The sensation, the insight (that’s the thing that really blew me away), all of a sudden I had a sense of understanding about everything. Everything was clear. There were really no more questions. I could have described to you the interaction of every kind of chemical, as an example. It’s kind of hard to give you the concept of this sort of thing. Now when I get into it, the questions start coming in. The rational mind starts to interfere. It’s more profound than the collective unconscious. What you read about, the experiences and all that good stuff, much more profound. There was a point where I was the most brilliant person that ever existed. I could have told you how anything worked. It was just like the whole world, everything, every mystery of life was exposed.

Margaret further described this universal knowledge:

It was just all knowing. It was a different kind of knowledge. There’s no words. It is just a knowledge. That you *just know*. Our brains were all in the same direction. We knew what each other knew.

It made sense to me that interconnection would allow the existence of universal knowledge. Nothing seemed to be held back so that Abigail could be “the most brilliant person that ever existed.” It is interesting that Margaret placed this knowledge beyond the

limitations of words. “It was a different kind of knowledge,” she said. After hearing this I wondered how confining it must feel to come back into a body restricted by the brain and rational thought.

I acknowledge that the communication Margaret talked about occurs within the unity universe. Transfer of knowledge, unity style, does not often use linear schemes such as words. Most communication takes the form of “knowing” or emotion. In my many conversations with Robert Monroe, founder of The Monroe Institute, he spoke about the “knowing” form of communication as coming in a “thoughtball.” Thoughtballs are entire concepts that are transmitted in an instant. This communication might include concepts, emotions, visuals, sounds, and, but not limited to, the five physical senses. Very few participants heard beings speak to them while in their near-death experiences. Most “felt” or “got” the communication. Emotion and intuition are key components of this communication. Unity fosters this type of communication. Words put boundaries on concepts. Direct knowledge, intuition, and emotion do not.

Memory seems to be affected by going into and coming out of unity space. The universal knowledge Margaret referred to is not carried back to the physical world. Similarly, concern for and knowledge about the physical body is often reduced to low levels when entering the unity space. Speculation leads me to believe that some types of memory are appropriate for the physical body, others for the non-physical. Maybe it’s part of the agreement we have for entering the physical world. Or perhaps all knowledge could be available to us, but we have not yet been able to establish the link to receive it.

Interconnection also allows persons to experience multiple, simultaneously conscious perspectives. When Martha encountered the black man on the street, she experienced both roles in that demeaning exchange. Later, she played all the roles at a

family gathering in order to experience the ramifications of her actions. This ability expands most near-death experiencers' definition of what it means to be a conscious being. What strikes me more than what experiencers said about the ability to be fully conscious in several places simultaneously is what they did not say. Very seldom did they express surprise, comment on weirdness, or indicate that this was unusual in any way. It was as if this aspect of their non-physical self was perfectly normal and to be expected.

When everything is interconnected, knowledge apart from my physical location is available. Louisa confirmed this, saying, "At times, I have a real awareness of things that are going on in people's lives, even though they are miles away, great distances between."

These statements demonstrated a convergence of what near-death experiencers actually experienced and what they now know about the physical world in which they live. Martha's experience with the humming wood and Louisa's intimate knowledge of distant people's lives were outside their near-death experiences. These experiences were available to them after their near-death experiences. They chose to bring back to the dualistic universe components believed to belong only to the unity world. Martha and Louisa exemplified how near-death experiencers choose which set of rules will guide their life even after returning to the physical. They also introduced the concept of the existence of one universe within another.

### *God's Energy is Love*

The nature of the conscious expression of God energy was described to me in almost every interview with remarkably similar expression. Thomas best portrayed the common themes:

I knew I was with God and that it was love. The emotion I was getting or giving was love from God. I didn't see anybody. I didn't see a form or anything like that. But I knew exactly where I was. I knew I was in heaven. The best word is love, a huge LOVE with capital letters, although it is so over-used in our language. It was different than any kind of love we know. It was so pure and unconditional and holy. There were no demands, no gains, no having to be anybody. Not having to be some definition. No son, husband, father, teacher, friend. It was unconditional, perfect, overflowing, very intense and warm. You could write down wonderful words for miles and still not be able to express what it is like. It's overwhelming.

The nature of God's energy is love. This is love that is not possessive or personal.

I appreciated how Thomas did not receive this love from any one person or deity. It came from being in contact with the unity universe. He knew the source, as would be expected in an interconnected universe. He also acknowledged that the love he gives first comes from God. It is God's to begin with. We are all part of the whole.

The interconnection of all parts of the universe with God's loving energy helped Letitia cement her place in the universe and her relationship to God:

How could I ever lose my faith and my hope or my love? Who am I? God. He's a part of me. He's what comes out in my random acts of kindness. Giving in my simple way. Just to be me. That's why He kept me alive.

The experiencers were unanimous in their conviction that we are worthy and loved. There is nothing humans can do to separate self from the love of God. We are a physical manifestation of the loving energy that is God. According to these experiencers, heaven is our birthright.

Not everyone in the non-unity world agrees. When I share this concept with community and religious groups, I often encounter significant resistance. The birthright concept is particularly troublesome, especially to church audiences. The belief of being ostracized from God for "bad" behavior is firmly established in our culture. Persons are taught that we "earn" God's favor. I try to end my presentations by asking the group to imagine what it would be like to live in a world where we all are accepted into God's

love. In this world, we cannot get life wrong. In unity, God always loves and accepts us, for we are but an aspect of God.

*All of Creation is as it Should Be*

The message is that we are loved, and we can't get life wrong. Our challenge is to let go of fear and allow the unfolding of our talents into God's plan. In the following story, Jane elegantly described how life review and judgment work. She, like Martha, figured out that her life has not matched up to its potential. Both were shown how they had limited their lives. Both learned that adopting love-based vs. fear-based behaviors makes all the difference in reaching their potential. I loved the way she characterized her encounter:

When I started into the tunnel, I had an experience of looking over my life, what they call that life review thing. It just kind of dotted by my face. It wasn't [another entity] taking inventory of other [me]. It was me taking inventory of myself and all the pettiness that I had had in my life. Me taking a look at me. It kind of put you in your place as a human being. It's humbling. The other side of it is that it makes you realize how much bigger and how much more wonderful the world is and life is. It was phenomenal how much greater a person I could be if I just let go of some of my fear and quit some of the behaviors I had developed over time. I had been limiting myself.

I gleaned a subtler message from their observations: There is no reason to judge one's self. Both Martha and Jane explicitly stated that during their past-life reviews they "take inventory" of self. They understood that God does not judge. We judge ourselves. God only loves and accepts. Martha concluded that we are to emulate God's lead "by sending love, accepting, and not judging. It's not our place to judge. Just accept and love." The softer interpretation of "taking inventory" suggests that we have the responsibility to acknowledge that there were missed opportunities in our lives. This acknowledgment leads to the realization (sometimes shown but often experienced as

alternative scenarios played out during the past-life review) that other behaviors would have allowed us to more fully express our full potential.

Experiencers impressed upon me that self-judgment leads to a series of counterproductive behaviors. Martha called this pattern the “wicked domino effect.” As I understand them, judging self discourages us from loving all of ourselves as God does. This in turn conjures up negative perceptions of parts of our being. These negative attachments are uncomfortable and destructive. By hanging on to them, we create resistance to what is. Resistance, which often manifests itself as defensiveness, becomes the root of pain that closes down elements of our selves. Their lesson to me is that we could lead more fulfilling lives if we dropped judgment, fear, negative attachments, and resistance and accepted the less-than-perfect aspects of ourselves. Without these self-defeating obstacles, we would reduce pain and be more open to the flow of God’s plan. Past-life reviews demonstrated to experiencers the difficulty of being open to and aligned with love while holding on to fear-based obstacles. For most experiencers who took inventory of themselves during their past-life review, the antithesis to love was fear. Letting go of fear-based behaviors was the single most “requested” wish. It is the root of most of our missed opportunities.

Thomas indicated that upon entering the unity universe, he discovered the perfect nature of that environment. In his words, “It’s just a trip. A near-death experience is like changing addresses and going someplace you’ve always wanted to go but you never knew about it. It is just perfect. It’s the most perfect part of life.” I found his depiction of his near-death experience as “the most perfect part of life” particularly telling. He did not say in death he entered perfection. His comments supported the notion that a near-death experience is part of life after physical incarnation. It is what makes him who he is. He



also hinted at acknowledging that to touch or consciously interact with the unity universe is to encounter the perfection that is God. It is an acknowledgment that all is perfect.

### *We Create Our Own Experiences*

Like a tuning fork that sympathetically resonates to a previously struck fork, energetic vibrations attract or create similar vibrations. This resonance became important when experiencers described their sense of ownership for their state of being. They came to realize that we consciously control the vibrations we give off. In the upcoming section on unity and truth, Franklin summarized the feeling of many near-death experiencers: “It’s also a gift to have had that experience. With it comes responsibility . . . . We have the responsibility to match our energy to the energy of God’s love. We have the responsibility to act in accordance with God’s loving plan.” Quincy echoed this idea. “I remember feeling overwhelmed and miserable and recognizing--being enlightened a little bit--that if I cooperated with the creative force, cooperated with God, then I would be protected, and I would have a role,” he said.

The surest way to be in alignment with individual mission is to be open to and cooperate with God’s creative energy. Experiencers found a unique truth: To be receptive is to rediscover who you are. The path to outer mission is achieved by creating a state of inner receptivity.

Experiencers came to realize that thought was energy. I observed that Martha, Holly, Zachary, and John moved freely around the non-physical universe. They communicated and created with thought. Their very act of thinking sent out a vibratory pattern to which the unity universe responded. They came to believe that thought is creation. Rachel likened it to heaven. “Heaven was spread out and soft-like. I know that it was as big as I wanted it to be.”

Experiencers described to me how they moved about the non-physical universe “at the speed of thought.” If they wanted to see a relative or check on some favorite property, all they had to do was think about it and they were instantly there. Their thoughts were tied to the creative energy of the universe. Being one with that creative energy, experiencers realized that they shouldered the responsibility for where they placed their own attention. What we think, thus what vibrations we give off, is our own responsibility.

I asked Dolley if she noticed a change in her attitude as a result of her near-death experience. She said:

I’m positive, rather than negative. I try not to dwell on the bad things that happen. I look at them as experiences, grow from them. Life is too short. I’m strong. I have more courage than I ever had. I’m more open in my relationships.

Dolley is taking responsibility for her own thoughts and attitudes. She does not judge her experiences using dualistic labels such as right/wrong or good/bad. Dolley “loves” all her experiences for what they bring to her. In this way, she remains open. This openness brings her courage. She told me that courage is not like drawing a line in the sand and standing toe-to-toe with the opposing force, but like something more vulnerable. I believe she was saying that it takes courage to be flexible. It takes courage to be open and not judge experiences.

I can choose to live in God’s unfolding and loving universe. I also can choose to resist love by fearing it. However, fear is a local phenomenon of the dualistic universe. It is not part of the unity universe. Martha reminded me, “What we do affects not only ourselves, but also everything in the universe. What you send out is what you get back. If *you want* happiness, contentment, peace, and love, then that’s what *you give* to others.” Martha’s statement again confirmed the interconnectedness of the unity universe. It also

validated the attractive nature of energy and the need for each individual to take responsibility for his or her thoughts and attitudes. The energetic nature of the unity universe requires that persons put forth what they desire before expecting anything in return. In this way, the unity universe is distinctly proactive and generative.

This generative aspect of the unity universe is not a new concept. Esoteric traditions call it the Law of Attraction. Spiritual teacher Ester Hicks described it this way:

Law of Attraction says, “That which is like unto itself is drawn.” Which means vibrations are always matched. So, as you experience the contrast, which inspires the new idea within you, this new idea, this desire, whether it is a strong one or a soft one, is summoning unto itself proportionately. And as it summons, it is always answered. It is the basis of our Universe. When it is asked, it is always given. The confusion that humans feel is that they think that they are asking with their words, or even with their actions, and sometimes you are, but the Universe is not responding to your words or your action. The Universe is responding to your vibrational calling. ([www.abraham-hicks.com](http://www.abraham-hicks.com))

Castaneda added this explanatory nuance: “Don Juan said the questions I had asked were only words; it was better not to voice the questions, but to ask them from within (p. 152).”

The realization that we create our own experiences made near-death experiencers highly sensitive to the world around them. They realized that experience is brought to them in a myriad of ways. Near-death experiencers used all their creative conscious awareness to be sensitive to the information they encountered. “There is no such thing as coincidence,” they often quoted to me.

If a deer crosses the road all of a sudden, I stop and say, “Take that as a sign.” If I see birds flying, or a butterfly lands on my car or other little things, it means a lot. I take that as a sign instead of taking things for granted. That is one thing that I do not do anymore, is take things for granted. (Dolley)

Martha was of the same mind:

Now, if someone calls me up, I think, “Well, I’m supposed to be talking to this person or she wouldn’t be calling me.” So, I find out what the heck is going on. I

believe there's a *reason* I come in contact with people. And, I need to find out what that reason is. If I try to push it aside, they're going to keep coming back at me saying, "Hey, take a look at me!" I kind of opened up that way.

I came to learn that our attitude creates the vibratory domain in which we live.

Who we are, combined with our love, desires, and fears, creates the energetic vibrations we give off, attracting experiences in sympathy with those vibrations. Experiencers try to remain open, acknowledging the Law of Attraction and recognizing the responsibility they have for their own desires and the freedom this allows them in their everyday lives.

### *In Unity There is Truth*

With all parts of the unity universe interconnected in a loving web of knowingness, there can be no places where doubt, deceit, or untruthfulness exists. No falsehood can exist in God. Integrity practiced is a prayerful gift. "My near-death experience helped create an honesty, mostly to myself. I had myself fooled for a long time. I'm enjoying life more now," said Elizabeth. Picking up on this honesty theme, Franklin told me:

There is an integrity there that we don't have here. I think it's such a gift. It's such a gift to be able to be alive, but it's also a gift to have had that experience. With it comes responsibility. With it comes some potential for conflict. I think the conflict is around integrity . . . I feel that I am a grateful recipient of some fuller understanding that I wouldn't have had otherwise. It only comes from being that close to the divine. I have tremendous gratitude for the gifts that come with every day, and there are gifts everyday. If living is done with ethics and caring, it is a prayerful thing. It's an exemplification of the divine here on earth.

Elizabeth and Franklin had the experience of living within God. They encountered the illusions of their lives dropping away and the truth of their essence being shown to them. Each told me they wanted to carry that truthfulness back to the physical world. As a result, Elizabeth's life is more joyful. The integrity of living in truth is a gift beyond

measure, Franklin said. He encountered conflict only when he tried to show others how to live in that truth. Franklin had a hard time accepting that everyone lives from his or her own truth, his or her own perspective. When he asked people to live from his new perspective, he thought he was making a reasonable, even noble, request. They viewed his suggestion as an affront to their long-standing beliefs in the tenets of the physical world. They had trouble understanding the place from which Franklin drew guidance and resisted change. Most persons held fast to their old paradigms to help them navigate the paths of the modern world.

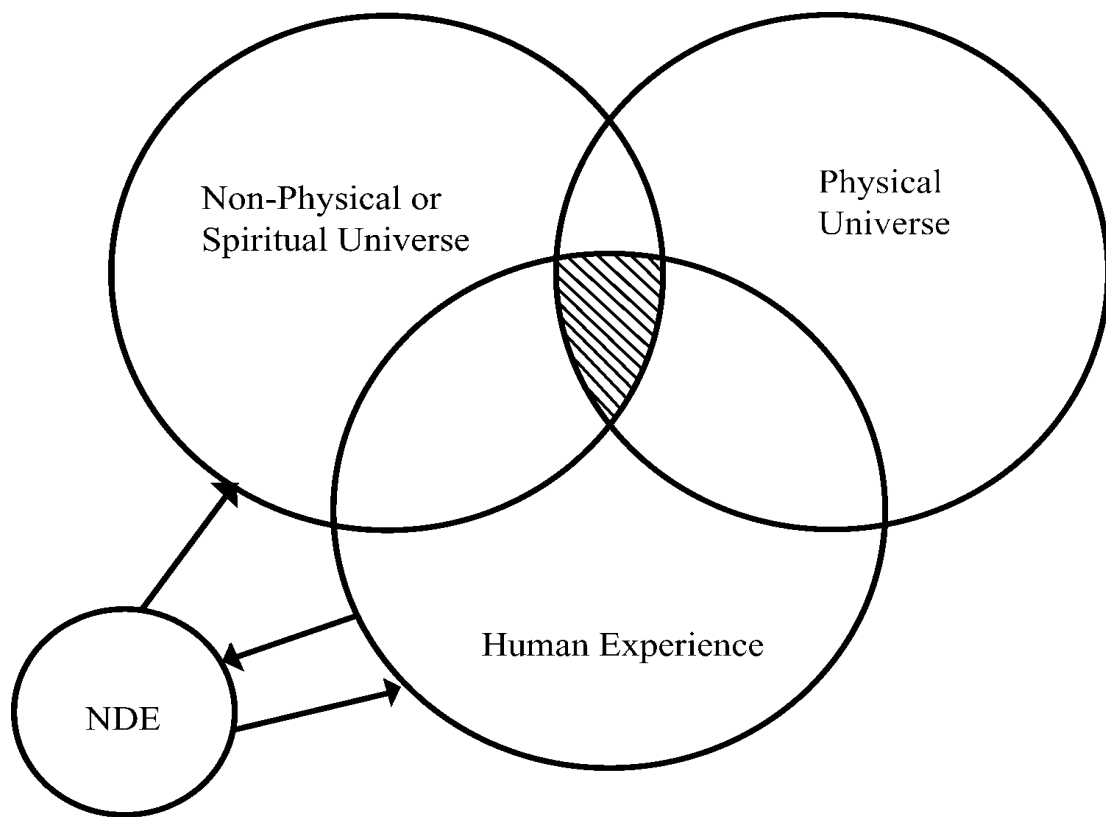
### Unity Model

The unity experience challenges conventional wisdom. Even experiencers struggled to grasp how it differs from the dualistic universe. To make these concepts more understandable, to them and to me, I searched for a visual model. Letitia helped inspire the formation of this model with this observation: “I see myself as being half human and half spiritual. That’s when I always get in trouble.” She sparked the recognition in me that we are a bridge between the physical and non-physical dimensions. Figure 1 helps illustrate this multi-dimensional concept.

Experiencers described three concepts at work in a near-death experience: a physical world, a non-physical world, and their experience in each. I concluded that the physical world is a subset of the non-physical world. The diagram in Figure 1 helped me frame this conclusion. The physical world circle honors Letitia’s statement that she felt half human and half spiritual. Julia’s earlier quote lent credence to this view:

I felt as if I had completeness, a sense of wholeness that I had not had previously and I haven't had since this sense of oneness. I still had a sense of I-ness, a sense of me, and I was part of something greater and was beginning to understand things.

Humans interpret the world of physical energy through a set of five extraordinary physical senses. These senses reassure them on a moment-to-moment basis that the physical world operates according to the laws of a dualistic universe. The human/physical self is very much of this world. It carries the instinctual drives necessary to survive in this physical world. Predatory behaviors, competition, aggressiveness, dominance, and survival skills are a part of our physical heritage. Yet, experiencers explained that our physical world is a subset of and infused with the properties of the non-physical unity world. In the physical world, both dimensions of dualism and unity exist simultaneously



*Figure 1.* Unity Model

and in the same space. The circles in Figure 1 indicate this space. The intersection of dualism and unity illustrates the unique experience of this overlap. Here is my explanation of each of these experiences:

Spiritual and human: Humans experience transcendence. Part of our human experience is infused with a spiritual dimension.

Physical and human: Humans experience the instinctual drives developed on this planet for survival on this planet.

Spiritual and physical: The physical world is in the act of becoming. It represents the interconnectedness of all things

All three: This shaded area represents unmanifested potential. From here, the universe acts in response to the vibration of human thoughts and desires. This is the area from which prayer works and in which participants experience thought as creation. This also is the area from which the near-death experience is created to assist transitioning souls from the physical to the non-physical universe. A popular culture metaphor for this would be the Star Trek “replicator,” a device that creates objects out of spoken intention. A “unity replicator” works in both the physical and non-physical dimensions.

Near-death experience circle: This circle represents the transition experience. It is outside the three rings to indicate that experiences of the non-physical dimension are unencumbered by the human experience of the physical. The arrows suggest that persons move back and forth between these states. Sarah confirmed this shifting sensation: “I was definitely close to another type of existence, another world, psychic, spiritual. It wasn’t like being in the normal swing of things anymore . . . . Physically and emotionally, the spiritual world impinges upon my concrete attitude toward life a bit . . . . When you’re having a near-death experience, and thinking how close you were to slipping over and



coming back, you aren't really sure which side you are on and how easy the transition is.” The return trip brings back a changed human soul, enlightened and entrained with the energy of the non-physical universe. I recall that Zachary said, “If you look at the world, sometimes it looks very confusing or very frustrating. Simple things can be so maddeningly out of place. My near-death experience showed me the-way-it-should-be type of place.” The trip from the near-death experience circle to the spiritual world is one-way. Experiencers described a boundary that they intuitively knew they could not cross if they wanted the opportunity to return to the physical. “There was a barrier. The darkness was still with me. Where my sister was standing was light and I wasn't going in there. I couldn't get in there where she was,” said Millard. Once the decision to stay in the spiritual world is made, the avenue for return is forever closed.

The non-physical and physical worlds are experienced differently. Humans choose which aspects of this dual nature they wish to experience and in which world they belong. By our makeup, we contain aspects of both universes. We are subject to the laws of nature. We are open to science and rational inquiry. We are also “human souls” with a will that is free. The part that is soul is outside scientific investigation and cannot be approached by empirical observation because it is not physical/empirical. Table 1 compares the essence of the non-physical and physical worlds concerning basic social structures and behavior patterns.

Table 1 is not intended to give a complete accounting of how the dualistic and unity universes differ, but rather to indicate in broad strokes the distinct characteristics of each. Additionally, the table depicts the dualistic universe as a subset of the unity universe. In the dualistic universe, two sets of rules exist: one simultaneously created from the five physical senses, the other governed by unity. This dual nature of the

physical world helps explain why there is such a thin veil between the two worlds. Both exist within each other. This is why experiencers make the transition so easily from one to the other. Castaneda described a similar dual nature. “For a sorcerer, there was but one single continuum of reality which had two, or perhaps more than two, parts from which he drew inferences of pragmatic value” (1968, p. 236).

### Reflection

The multidimensional nature of my being means that I can choose which set of rules will govern my life. Holly described this as picking the unity book off the shelf when she needed it. Martha relied on her dreams and her teacher/protector, Andrew. (In a curious coincidence, Castaneda refers to the plant Mescalito as being capable of being a teacher and also a protector.) By recognizing both the dualistic and unity aspects of human nature, we actively choose which mental construct in which to live and operate. In other words, the rules that dictate how our world operates depend on our mental model, our perspective, and our conscious attention.

I was very familiar with the rules of the physical world before my near-death-like experience. After Mary Fran and Nolan allowed me to enter the Light and participants helped me rediscover this realm, I now know more about why I reacted as I did at Nolan’s bedside. No wonder I felt such joy. I remembered that I am united with God. I realized that I was not separate from God’s love but instead live from it. The joy of reunion that Nolan felt as he embraced and was embraced by his mother is the same joy we all feel being reunited with God. It is exquisitely wonder-full. Unity is unending, unbounded, limitless loving energy that is God. In God all of creation is perfect.

Table 1.

*Comparison of the essence of the non-physical and physical worlds concerning basic social structures and behavior patterns*

Structure	Non-Physical	Physical
Universe	Unity: whole, complete, interconnected, open	Dualistic: separate, closed, incomplete, boundaries
Relationship	Both / and	Either / or
Primary emotion	Love	Fear
Economic system	Abundance	Scarcity
Creation	Attraction / unfolding	Will / projection
Projection	Acceptance	Judging
Activity	Being	Doing
Time	All time is now, no time	Linear
Self	Multidimensional / unlimited	Alone / limited
Core nature	Spiritual	Physical
Life	Eternal being	Begins and ends with the body
Social goal	Be yourself	Be normal
Acknowledgment of God	Spiritual	Religion
Leadership	Lead by being, servant	Lead by doing, control, power
Mission	Continual creation	Achieving a goal (e.g. happiness, comfort, wealth, and perfection)

Participants in this study came back from their near-death experience with a heightened sense of importance about relationships, both significant and incidental. I came back with a feeling that change is rooted in the rediscovery of the interconnectedness underlying our universe. What once was lost is now found through their near-death experience. Experiencers needed and wanted to keep that connection alive in their lives in the physical. Expressing kindness in relationships is a way to touch again the purity of God's love. My stance is to be present. My precious gift is the ability to make choices for connection, or not, and live with what those choices draw to each of us.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Freedom

“The freedom is in the creativity that comes from knowing  
that there is a relationship with God.”

--*Franklin*

Once I understood, accepted, and felt the concept of unity, I could begin to make sense of the remarkable number of statements about freedom. Castaneda said the goal of the operative orders was “to teach one how to become a man of knowledge” (1968, p. 237). Similarly, contact with unity seems to spawn a burst of freedom in near-death experiencers, teaching the experiencer a new way of living. No other single after-effect had more importance than this new perspective. Experiencers described their freedom as falling into two categories--freedom from and freedom to. The near-death experience granted experiencers the *freedom from* societal roles, authority, status, time, expectations, unconscious choices, self-delusion, and fear of death. With these attachments obliterated, experiencers seized the *freedom to* envision options, choose alternatives, be themselves, be open and flexible, live in the present, express their spiritual selves, live congruent lives, be honest, detach and be more direct, express their authentic selves, view the world with continuously new eyes, and live in the joy of God’s love.

The distinctions *freedom from* and *freedom to* are artificial designations. Each example, with slight reworking of perspective, could be held as either *from* or *to* or both. I like to use the example of being freed from the authority of others. This same concept can be represented as having freedom to live a more self-assured life. The intent here is to

recognize the wording chosen by the experiencers. This is the most powerful application of the quotation.

Experiencers loosely defined freedom. Yet, the implied freedom in their remarks and their non-verbal cues gave a real sense of what their near-death experience did to foster this feeling and create options for a new way of being. Intonations, body language, and pacing bolstered their assertions that expanding liberty infused and characterized their lives. As Abraham observed, “I am now free to run my own life.”

When I heard Abraham say “free,” my imagination leapt to a beautiful spring day, warm breezes blowing through windows raised for the first time since fall. For me, freedom is an experience of freshness, energy, new smells, and openness. My visceral understanding of the words Abraham spoke helped define freedom beyond words. I hold to this sense as I seek to describe freedom from and freedom to. I invite the reader to do the same.

### Freedom From

Increased freedom falls into categories loosely defined as freedom from aspects of self, society, and the environment.

#### *Freedom From: Self*

Some experiencers discovered freedom because they were healed in ways that they could not have imagined in the physical world. These benefits enabled them to pursue life in a manner inconceivable before their near-death experience. “There were these presences. I can see them in my mind as I talk about it. These presences comprised people that I have known, freeing me as I walk down this corridor,” said Holly. What Holly meant by “freeing” is not exactly clear. From the context of our conversation, the

implication was that the presences were stripping her of unconscious barriers. As a result of their actions, Holly was freed to make conscious choices because the unconscious limitations had been lifted. Holly was free from unconscious resistance. She could create and act from a new paradigm of her own intentional construction.

The near-death experience allowed the experiencer to grasp the nature of self so differently that they had no alternative but to change their self-definition and, concomitantly, their actions. Holly shared this insight. “The greater impact has been on my personal understanding of myself as a spiritual being.” The experience that each of us is a spiritual being, “alive” and alert apart from our physical body, is a profound reorientation. What was once an intellectual concept has been experienced. It has been understood at the deepest levels. As Holly identified “additional and different ways of knowing,” this expansion of what it means to be human often caught experiencers unprepared for the range and magnitude of the differences.

The greatest freedom that experiencers carried away, with striking consistency and insistence, was overcoming the fear of death. Near-death experiencers considered the transition from the physical to a spiritual body a most precious gift. With every fiber of their being, they anticipated death with a sense of welcome, release, and rejoicing. For Abraham, this transition was an event of celebration: “I’m not fearful of death because if that’s the way it’s going to be, I can’t wait! ... You shouldn’t fear death. I can say that because I’ve been through the black hole already.”

I could feel the sense of anticipation as he spoke these words.

William too, was positively exuberant about his transition: “The day I died was the most wonderful day of my life! There is no fear in death. There is none.”

Somehow the near-death experience silences the survival instinct that is held within the body. Experiencers remembered they could not die. A near-death experience reminds the soul from whence it came and to where it will be returning. This experience registers on a level so deep that even the instincts of the physical body cannot overcome it. It allows near-death experiencers to welcome death and anticipate the wonder of its arrival.

The near-death experience has other silencing powers. It can turn off the voices and judgments in our heads. “In my mind there was no thought, just me being there. I was free!” exclaimed Martha. Holly described this same effect. “There was none of that thinking. It was just pure. It was just being.” Both considered it freedom to experience self, society, and the environment apart from words, history, and judgment. She got to see life afresh, with new eyes. Experiencers had a chance to view life without the stories of her past. They are free to create new stories.

There is plenty about the near-death experience that is ambiguous, ambivalent, and absurd. Experiencers dealt with this in numerous ways. Franklin showed a typical reaction, with depth of self-understanding, patience, and sophistication: “I don’t have to figure it all out. All I have to do is pray that I can be open to what’s being given to me. That’s very freeing . . . . Life is continual expression of prayer.”

Sophistication comes from the joining of three concepts--first, an attitude of openness; second, the activity of prayer and the recognition that an open posture is a continual expression of prayer; and third, the freedom that comes with allowing yourself to be directed by God. This direction is in lieu of other authority we encounter in the physical world.



### *Freedom From: Society*

Near-death experiencers have an enhanced sense of freedom from the authority of society. This is due in part to a common aftereffect of a near-death experience: lessened concern with impressing others. Abraham was very direct. "I know myself and that's all that matters," he said. This knowingness creates self-sufficiency that non-near-death experiencers have a difficult time replicating. Without the need to impress others, near-death experiencers are no longer swayed by money, status, or influence as they once were. "I am not concerned with making money in my life," said John. Thomas was equally clear. "I like myself better and I'm OK with who I am. I don't have to prove anything to anybody . . . I don't feel like there is anybody in authority any more." In trying to coach Castaneda, don Juan explained, "No! I'm never angry at anybody! No human being can do anything important enough for that. You get angry at people when you feel that their acts are important. I don't feel that way any longer" (1968, p. 72).

Experiencers found that this attitude helped them stay true to the congruent life they wished to lead. This sometimes put them out of sync with society's rules and expectations. It often made them poorer employees. Experiencers do not follow arbitrary rules and doctrine not aligned with their near-death experience. Fear as a motivating factor is reduced markedly.

### *Freedom From: Environment*

Absence of fear put some near-death experiencers at risk in the physical world. Louisa in particular found herself in trouble when confronted with violence because she lacked fear of the physical consequences. In situations where "normal" persons would have backed off, she doggedly pursued. This sometimes put co-workers in the disconcerting position of rescuing her from danger. She said:

I don't have a fear of people, and sometimes I have been in situations where there is probably great risk to me. I don't recognize the risk because I don't have a fear of death. I've even been told that by people who have tried to intimidate me and scare me. *I'm* scary because I'm not afraid of them. I've had experiences where, after the fact, I've realized, "Oh, I guess that was kind of a dangerous situation . . . ." In one experience, a person was very threatening to me and I know that she was capable of taking my life. I had a sense of complete calm about it. Had not another person entered into that room and saved me, she may have actually killed me. I would have been just fine about it. I remembered a shift in my brain saying that I may die and I had just this absolute calm about it.

When Louisa said "shift in my brain," I saw her instinctually go to her mental bookshelf (a la Holly), pull down her reference text, and turn to the chapter "Physical Threats and Unity: Turning off the survival instinct." This new realization allowed Louisa to react in ways consistent with her unity viewpoint, but completely left her at odds with her physical self.

Another freedom experiencers encountered was the loss of their physical body. Far from being traumatic, near-death experiencers saw this as a time of opportunity. Martha and Franklin each had different reactions upon leaving bodies that were damaged. Martha's centered on freedom from the heaviness of physical body. Franklin confirmed this same feeling and then focused on becoming pain-free and healed. Said Martha, "What's the purpose of leaving my physical body? I know I felt so good when I got out because I was lighter, and I remember thinking, 'I'm free, I'm free.'"

Franklin explained this in detail:

I had this sense of being, but experienced no pain. Incredibly light, the closest thing that I can imagine that would be in our descriptive vocabulary is "gravity-free." There is no gravity, no nothing. I'm this conscious being without form . . . . There are no burdens. That comes with having a physical body to drag around. Breathing takes work and talking is even more work. It's just this feeling of elation that I don't have to put up with this stuff. I don't have to do that anymore. Such joy. You're free of it. It's real hard to think, What if I would have done what's easiest to do? . . . During this experience I was pain-free and having this feeling about my body that I couldn't possibly imagine having. For about a year I

tried to recreate that sensation through meditation. I tried to recreate it because that was the only time I didn't hurt. I had this sense of being supine.

I asked Franklin how connected he was to his physical body while in his near-death experience. He said, "I was healed; totally free of that intense pain and everything awful, everything hurtful. It's just extracted, gone. Totally gone." Most experiencers shared his joy to be free of the pain and work of maintaining a physical body. No wonder to me that Louisa no longer felt any fear of death. She was released from having to continually take care of her physical body. Experiencers saw the loss of a body as another burden of the physical world lifted.

### Freedom To

After the attachments of self, society, and environment are loosened, *freedom from* evolves into *freedom to*. Comments about freedom were directed toward the same groupings of self, society, and the environment. Most of the comments fell into the "self" section. My insight is based on the impact of the near-death experience--on how we feel and the energy we emit. This energy is what attracts experience to us. Martha indicated that what we do, the energy we give off, affects everything in the universe(s).

#### *Freedom To: Self.*

Freedom comes to self when near-death experiencers realized that they no longer had anything to conceal. With society's rules and expectations no longer as valid and authoritative, near-death experiencers found themselves freer to express their opinions and identities. Openness was now a choice. This choice allowed experiencers to live life more fully.

“I don’t have anything to hide now. I’m practicing living in line with what I feel I’m supposed to be doing here. It’s what I’m being called to do. I’m just listening now, where I was really disconnected before,” Hannah said.

Hannah revealed a lot of information in this small quote. Most near-death experiencers felt directed to pursue the insights Hannah identified: don’t hide (be open and express your gifts); living in line (act according to the newly acquired perspective of unity); I’m called (there is divine direction and be open to it); and listen (adopt a stance of receptiveness). These themes appeared over and over again in different forms. The recognition of their former disconnectedness also was a common topic. Post-near-death experiencers wanted to stay connected and be in tune with the energy, wisdom, and direction provided by unity. Experiencers believed that humans are continually directed with divine guidance. We can listen if we choose.

Franklin chose not only to listen, but also to remember his relationship with divine guidance:

What came back with me is the knowledge that I have a relationship with the divine, no question about it. It’s day-to-day, everyday ongoing, whether I’m on Highway 169 going across the Minnesota River or changing shoes or washing dishes. He and I are in communication. There is a plan that I’m an active participant in. We talk about this. We set goals and life is directed. I try to be open to my cues. So the freedom is in the creativity that comes from knowing that there is a relationship. It’s like, wow, that’s so cool. I never felt that before. I never had a sense of being such an active participant in the relationship and in my own life path. But the downside is the responsibility that comes with it. How remarkable that He trusts me enough to be an active part of that, a co-creator. It’s like, “Listen up, Franklin!”

Franklin fine-tuned his attention, listening and interpreting skills after his near-death experience. He celebrated the recognition that this relationship to the divine was a permanent and continuous adventure. Franklin also recognized that God had a plan and he was an active, not passive, participant in it. “We talk about this,” was a bold statement

of the generative and co-creative nature of Franklin's life plan. God and Franklin were a team in producing his life and the life of everything in the universe(s). Once he understood the goals, Franklin tried to remain open to the cues on how God would direct life's circumstances to fulfill the plan.

What I find fascinating is that Franklin felt freedom in relationship. He said, "The freedom is in the creativity that comes from knowing that there is a relationship with God." This is my favorite quotation of the whole study. It speaks to me on many levels. One is Franklin's relief in knowing that this relationship with God is real, stable, dependable, and interactive. Another is the security he feels in knowing he is operating out of unity. The Law of Attraction that exists in this space will support any decision Franklin decides to make. The generative nature of the universe assures Franklin that his desires will be manifest. A third level is that God trusts Franklin to co-create the experiences he is to have in this life. Franklin is right. This offers tremendous creative freedom and responsibility. My belief system prior to this study suggested that a relationship implies certain boundaries. In this relationship with God, there are no boundaries. It exemplifies perfect freedom.

Freedom comes to self because some participants experienced options they had not known existed in their physical lives. They could now choose things they didn't think were alternatives before their near-death experience. "With these two near-death experiences, I felt like there were options shown to me that could have been," James said. James had been living in a life dysfunctional by even the most generous standards. With every passing month, he saw fewer options for living a healthy life. His near-death experience literally pointed out alternatives he didn't know had existed. It showed him

how to change his response to the world. James adopted the changes. In response to his changed attitude, everything else changed. Life became better, much better.

Some near-death experiencers were so bound up in the expectations of the predominant culture that they had difficulty knowing who they were and what they wanted. They could not even be truthful with themselves. Their near-death experience healed that rift between imagined and authentic self, allowing them more freedom to know themselves and enjoy life. “My near-death experience helped create an honesty mostly to myself. I had myself fooled for a long time. I’m enjoying life more now,” noted Elizabeth. “You know, I really like myself now,” confirmed Holly.

Over and over, experiencers stressed how easy and wonderful the transition was between the physical and non-physical worlds. Some remembered the feeling and used that as a source of strength. Margaret shared, “It has helped in stressful situations to go back to that feeling.” Freedom to choose alternative attitudes sometimes arises out of being able to recall the feeling instigated by a near-death experience. Holly said, “Just recalling it now is so real. Maybe that’s the comfort, knowing that it’s there and waiting and accessible whenever I need to go there. Yeah, it’s almost like I can touch it.” Experiencers remembered what the feeling was like and brought it back into their physical lives to change how they reacted to the world. This added dimension of self was a coping skill appreciated and used by experiencers.

The last three quotations expressed freedom of being. Learned in the near-death experience, this freedom helped experiencers stand up to authorities that exist in the physical world. The following are examples of how it felt to learn this skill. Franklin stated simply that, “When death happens, it is freedom.” Thomas noted how freedom was intertwined with all the emotions associated with unity:

When you get in the Light, that's heaven. That's the most love and peace and joy and hope and tenderness and power and freedom and happiness. Every word that we have for something good--times billions. We don't have words for it. It's safe, it's perfect, it's heaven.

Later, he added: "Love. Freedom. Lightness. Nothing to worry about. Nothing to care about. No pain. And the freedom of just being."

Experiencers brought back this knowledge about another way of being, without attachment.

### *Freedom To: Society*

By stripping away society's authority, near-death experiencers accessed the freedom they needed to be focused and clear about their interactions with others. "I'm being more direct in what I need to be doing," Franklin confided. This seemed to fit neatly with Hannah's admonition to not hide. Being more direct with others and ourselves helps each of us live the life we desire. What if we sometimes have the desire to be left alone? Louisa felt comfortable in many situations. "Because of the transcendent life experiences, I do have a lot of freedom. I have a lot of autonomy, I am very comfortable alone." Louisa felt less pressured in social situations. She could choose engagement or solitude and feel comfortable about her choice.

### *Freedom To: Environment*

Some near-death experiencers came away with a detached perspective that enabled them to experience the world differently. These experiencers found themselves out of their bodies, observing the physical world with a new set of eyes. They viewed the world without attachments. Elizabeth's reaction was typical:

I wasn't even upset that I might have had a dirty house. There were no earthly concerns. I don't remember there being any thought at all when this happened. Thoughts came afterward. It just happened. You're not thinking about what's going on down there, you're just watching it happen.

Some, like Elizabeth, experienced their near-death experience without thought.

Some were so detached that they experienced it without sentiment. I bring us back to

Holly:

It was very much sort of a third-person perspective. I've never seen myself from this perspective, but it was very unemotional. It wasn't even a sense of relief of not being in any pain because there was no consciousness of pain up in that corner.

Later she described the freedom of being present:

There was no sense of, "Gee, where am I?" Any kind of logical or rationalizing trying to interrupt what the experience was--I never thought that. Didn't matter. Wasn't relevant to the situation. There's none of that thinking. It was just pure. It was just being. It was just right then. There was no sense of past or present. There was no sense of the future, or now or then. It was just this sort of *is*. A place. There wasn't a thing. There wasn't a sense of dimension. In terms of a time dimension, it was, just is.

Holly's sense of no past (a lack of historical filters and resulting emotional attachments) and no future (no concern over what would happen next) allowed her to experience the "is-ness" of the present. With that present mind, Zachary was able to see events for what they truly were:

At that time, life was completely forgotten. I wasn't thinking anything about life. All of that's gone. I mean that's just nothing. That kind of stays with you in a way. Of all the things that I think about now, that's one of the things that stayed with me. Perhaps more than anything. And of this, life is nothing.

Lest we misunderstand Zachary, "life is nothing" needs clarification. Zachary was trying to describe what it meant to live a life free of attachments. He was attempting to describe (and recreate) a mindset that placed no meaning on the past and anticipated no future. Life "means nothing" without either of these perspectives. Life has meaning only in the observable present, which of course changes every moment. When the present changes, there is no "emotional memory" to carry into the forever present. This doesn't



mean Zachary has no memory of the past; rather, that there are no attachments to that past.

Those participants who noted they were able to objectively view their situation, both in the non-physical state and later in the physical, carried with them the gift of freedom. This freedom from attachments suggests the ability to observe without attachment. Near-death experiencers were neither attached nor detached, but retained the ability to observe in the present.

This was one of the more difficult concepts for me to wrap my mind around. Zachary literally told me that life has no meaning, that we assign it meaning in the *physical present* because we have a sense of linear time that allows past memories and anticipated futures. In the unity stance of the *forever present*, this concept of time does not apply because it has no meaning. I believe Zachary was saying that one could experience freedom from meaning.

I remember how Elizabeth and Holly described near-death experience as “life from the third person.” It was pure being. Zachary’s call to live in the present expressed a cornerstone of freedom.

J. Mitchell, in *Revisioning Educational Leadership: A phenomenological approach* (1990) looked at the nature, or is-ness, of experience as primarily ontological, i.e., an experience of “being” something. He felt that experience could not be broken down into decision, communication, or relation, but rather had to be viewed as total experience, each facet examined only for purposes of exposing total meaning. “When we look at the meaning of how we experience . . . we interpret this consciousness in the same way we interpret a work of fine art. [It] is the practice of a delicate art” (pp. 112-113). The delicate art of interpreting the disconnected, third-person is-ness of a near-death

experience recognizes that the direct, unencumbered knowledge created by the near-death experience “is personal in the sense that our understanding of any fact is predicated on our construction of reality in which the situation of ‘knowing’ occurs. We are always committed to a form of knowing that is consonant with the values and goals implicit in what is being taught and learned” (pp. 112-113). What happens during the near-death experience in the third person, continual, observable present is exposure to a way of being outside of the common experience lived by most persons. The benefit of this construction of reality is to create another form of knowing, another way of being that experiencers can draw upon in their post-near-death experience lives.

Near-death experiencers like Zachary and Margaret were able to bring this wisdom back to their lives in the physical. They found a way to cultivate their being side and view their new lives with no attachments. Experiencing without attachments gave them freedom to act as situations presented themselves. Margaret told me:

It was unusual for me not to wonder during the near-death experience. I took everything for granted. That shows a non-normal thought pattern. I didn’t question it at all. There was none of this, “Who am I?” None of the introverted thought patterns. It was just a receiving of a sensation and a recording of it. I was very much a receptive being. I had no will power in it at all. It was occurring and I was seeing it and I had no will one way or another to even question it. It was happening, end of story.

The implication for society is a new way of being in the present. Experiencers are cultivating, living, and teaching the skill of non-attachment to their families and friends. No attachment frees them from the constraints of the past and the authorities of the present and prepares them to see the world in a new matrix--a way of being open and closer to the truth and freedom of direct experience.

## Reflection

When unity looks in the mirror, freedom is reflected back. When I see unity's effect on experiencers, I see fear dropping away. When fear drops away, I see love given the freedom to be expressed. It is not the love of possessiveness, but the love of God flowing through each experiencer in a way that is present and individual.

In various proportions, fear dropping away meant for near-death experiencers the reduction in unconscious resistance, hiding, judgment, and fear of death. It meant that knowledge constructs, money, authority, and body image did not bind them. The memory of emotional attachment disappeared. I marveled at how near-death experiencers grew. They became more honest with themselves and others. They developed the ability to be with self. They fostered the freedom to express their gifts, talents, and love.

Near-death experiencers aspired to be open to "hear" or communicate with God on a daily basis in everything they did. What I've come to understand is that every small nuance and act has a layered impact. As I "listen" to the messages given to me, I am reminded that the near-death experience is only one way of infusing this "knowledge" into humans. My interviewing them is another way. Hence, this shows the nature of God working through many layers of interconnectedness. Others learn these precepts and concepts from "life experience." They are continually being learned through relationships with others channeled through God. This is God's message in many platforms. The near-death experience is only one, albeit intensive, way to "listen and learn."

Near-death experiencers are creating a new perspective from that which they knew to be true. This view reflects the intertwining nature of the dualistic and unity universes. It puts forth the rules that allow experiencers to live in both the physical and non-physical worlds. It guides attitudes and choices on self, society, and how we are to

live in the physical world. The new freedom allows experiencers the choice to be cognitive, rational, intuitive, and conceptual. It broadens the choices for everyone.

Ultimately, this new perspective redefines for all of us what it means to be human and to be free.

## CHAPTER TEN

### My Journey

“Maybe all my life is the great thing that was going to happen.”

*--Zachary*

At this point in the dissertation most researchers present the implications of their work. This, however, is not a normal implications chapter. Instead, I am using this chapter to offer four observations that partly shaped my learning process and partly landed me where I am now.

My journey began in a hospital room in Rochester, Minn. The loss and the blessing that was bestowed upon me that day led to almost 20 years of searching to discover what happened to me and, in turn, who I am. Pushed by the disquiet of an unformed and unarticulated desire to identify the bits of the puzzle that are me, I found myself in random pursuit of knowledge from books, trips, workshops, schools, and other seekers. When I enrolled at the University of St. Thomas, I found an academic home where the mention of God or spirituality did not engender rolled eyes and disapproving looks. I knew what I was searching for was out there, or perhaps inside, somewhere. A chance comment in a conversation with my faculty advisor (later committee chair), Dr. Bruce Kramer, sparked a recognition that an inquiry into near-death experiences would help me find resolution to long unanswered questions.

Life has a way of leading me to the answers I seek. There were four pivotal moments when I found insights that helped me understand where I needed to go with this research. Each moment held a key, a piece of the puzzle that I needed to move forward.

As I discovered each successive puzzle piece, the previous one became even more explicable, its nuances revealed and clarified. This chapter identifies these four moments and describes how these insights fit into my journey and my understanding of self. The first of these discoveries was the astrolabe metaphor. It granted me the freedom to set aside all I knew to view one reality from another perspective. The second moment was incorporating the word “unity” into the descriptions being shared with me by near-death experiencers. Unity helped me understand the common orientation to which experiencers were reacting. The third puzzle piece was discovering aspects of freedom that are inextricably linked to unity. The fourth was the realization that I needed to commit to my own being-ness. By this I mean that I needed to make conscious decisions about my life, which reality I would choose to occupy, and what kind of balance that would require. All this led to the rediscovery of my new astrolabe.

### Astrolabe Metaphor

The first of the four puzzle pieces emerged during an unlikely event. It was one of those perfect fall Sunday afternoons we occasionally get in Minnesota. Golden leaves, bright blue skies, and the warmth of Indian summer made it a day to be outdoors. I chose to spend it at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival, a gathering that celebrates the artisans and life of the Middle Ages by recreating a 16th-century village in architecture, dress, food, and speech. All the merchants, tradespersons, and ancillary performers take special pains to immerse themselves and festival-goers in the atmosphere of the times. One such merchant was selling a curious metal disk called an “astrolabe” (ă’s’ tre-lāb) (Figure 2). It was handcrafted from period materials, using ancient methods and great precision. He told me that it foretold the seasons and placement of sun, moon, and stars. It looked

intriguing. The shopkeeper assured me that it was “very accurate for our time,” meaning the Middle Ages. As he explained its functions, I realized that I had to step into his time and perspective in order to grasp what it was that he was trying to convey. That was when bells started to ring in my head. My near-death experiencers all struggled with how to explain their experiences to people who had no context for understanding them. This ancient artifact held the key to their dilemma.

My merchant-friend described the astrolabe as a sophisticated astronomical computer for determining the positions of heavenly bodies. The plate-sized object consisted of several rotating disks that helped the observer see how the sky looked at any given time and position. The design and function of the astrolabe were based on real-world visual observations of the heavens from an earth-centered, geocentric perspective. Based on the Ptolemaic system, it assumed that the sphere of stars revolved around an immobile earth once a day. Despite the faultiness of its assumptions about how the solar system works, it proved to be accurate in its predictions. It was therefore considered a useful tool, especially to farmers, clergy, and others who needed good data on seasons and positions of heavenly bodies. It worked, but it was based on incorrect assumptions ([www.astrolabes.org](http://www.astrolabes.org)).

This same contrast confronts persons who have near-death experiences. Many know there is a discontinuity between the physical and non-physical worlds but lack the vocabulary or conceptual model from which to describe their experience. As a result, they too struggle to explain themselves to non-near-death experiencers and gain acceptance from the community of their peers. This is why the carillon went off in my head. Experiencers knew that the old assumptions they had held about the underlying structures and relationships between the physical and non-physical worlds were wrong.



Figure 2. Astrolabe



Yet, they had to acknowledge that consensus cosmology worked and that society relied on this very predictable structure.

When experiencers wanted to share their new understanding with non-near-death experiencers, they faced overwhelming resistance. The astrolabe metaphor helped explain to me their reluctance to describe to others what they knew to be true. The astrolabe is my metaphor for a system of thinking that works but is based on incorrect assumptions. It represents and symbolizes near-death experiencers' current understanding of consensual reality.

The astrolabe holds additional meaning for me because it contrasts with the near-death experiencers' acquired perspective. This revelation led me to speculate that, because we come from unity, in that state we can know only unity. It is only by the contrast with duality that near-death experiencers know the extraordinary beauty and perfection that is God's love. The only way we can truly know God's love is to feel the separation from it. Experiencers know they can never be separated from that Love because it is the essence from which we are made. However, in duality, a universe designed to provide contrast, this separation can seem very real. When near-death experiencers first entered the physical world of duality, they stepped into an environment that included the experience of separation. Through some as yet undefined mechanism, they "forgot" their previous state of unity. Upon returning "home" to the Light, near-death experiencers received a double dose of contrast as they entered the non-physical world of unity and again when they left to re-enter the physical. This process gave them insights and a change in perspective. What they went through seems more than a paradigm shift. Changing paradigms indicates to me a shift in perspective within the

same reality structure. I believe near-death experiencers became cognizant of two separate structures that persons use to define reality and how that reality holds together.

### Unity Orientation

The second major piece of the puzzle revealed itself as I pondered the new realities that near-death experiencers discovered. What had I learned? How was my near-death experience structured to help me “get what I needed”? Insights came from the participants in the study one at a time, each building on each other, each creating variations on a theme. But the themes seemed to point somewhere. Why were the near-death experiencers so divergent in the particulars and so similar in the main? What was it that they reacted to that treated each as an individual and allowed each to become part of a shared experience? So many of the participants talked in some way about the interconnectedness they experienced. It dawned on me that they were reacting to a common force, a common experience, an interconnected whole. The experiencers gave me the definitions. It was my job to find the words and concepts that incorporated all of them. The second piece of the puzzle was the discovery of unity.

Once I viewed the experiences as individual expressions of unity, the near-death experience started to make sense. I could return to the two questions that started this research: What is a near-death experience? and Why does it work the way it does? The data strongly suggested that the near-death experience is a transitional experience expressly designed to assist persons in moving from the physical to the non-physical world. All the components seem intended to make the process of transition easier, with fewer traumas, leaving the individual soul capable of rejoining the non-physical universe. I recalled that at the moment of most severe physical distress, persons in the process of

losing their physical bodies were thrust into a world of peace, love, joy, and no pain. Greeted by divine beings, loving relatives, friends, and pets, they were heartily welcomed with acceptance borne of long anticipation. These beings then guided them through the Light until they could meet with their teacher/protector and go through the past-life review process. Here they were encouraged to review their lives, learning and incorporating everything possible about the choices they made of their creation. They were loved, guided, and supported by this being until this aspect of their return home to the non-physical was finished. Some moved on to healing centers where they recover from the trials of living in the physical. Others experience universal knowledge and have other transcendental experiences as detailed by Ring. Physical, emotional, and spiritual traumas are healed, and the person is brought back into wholeness.

A popular culture metaphor for this process is the “away mission” from Star Trek. In this television show, small bands of explorers leave the mother ship, learn what they can from their assigned mission, return to a receptive and grateful crew, are guided to the debriefing by crew who catch them up on the latest news, are debriefed, and finally are healed in the medical bay of any injuries sustained during the mission. The near-death experience has that feel.

During the interviewing process, I kept noticing that each of the experiencers “got what they needed.” After realizing that the near-death experience is a transition and healing process, this all made sense to me. But how did it work? After completing dozens of interviews, studying the literature, and working for 20 years to make sense of the near-death experience, I have come to several major conclusions. When we leave the physical world, we enter the unity field of the non-physical. This intelligent, energetic field vibrates at the rate of God’s love. There is recognition that, as new arrivals, we are

energetic and wounded beings, vibrating at a rate commensurate with the dualistic universe and the experiences we brought with us. Being immersed in God's energetic field allows us to accept that energy sympathetically. Each experience is designed specifically for us and with us (our experiences and memory are now part of unity again) by the intelligent consciousness that is God. This is similar to the tuning-fork analogy used in earlier chapters. Returning beings start to move with--vibrate to--God's love and wholeness. The wholeness of unity means there can be no need, pain, wounds, deceit, or trauma in that realm. I believe that the moment the dualistic and unity worlds intersect to create a portal through which the human soul travels, the energy behind the portal influences the situation to facilitate the transition experience. To reenter unity is to literally become one again, in God's loving presence. That oneness is our heritage, our right, and our home.

Has any of this been tested? The answer is yes, by a very interesting source. Remote viewing author Joe McMoneagle (1993) told me that after his first near-death experience, he believed that the Light was God. He came off the operating table exclaiming, "The Light is God and we never die!" He extolled to anyone and everyone who would listen that this was true. During his second near-death experience some years later, he left his physical body only to be greeted by a band of small beings that told him it was their job to keep him from entering the Light. Frustrated at not being able to reenter this blissful state, he demanded to be let into the Light. At this point, another single powerful being joined them. Overcome with the beauty and magnificence of it, he asked, "Are you Jesus?" "Yes," was the reply. Then, not so sure he had it right, he asked, "Are you my mother?" Again, "Yes," was the reply. This confused him. As he looked

past the being into the distant Light, it occurred to Joe that the Light had edges. At this moment, Joe returned to his body.

This exchange bothered him greatly. He had been so sure of what he had experienced the first time, and then his understanding was turned upside down. There were places where the Light was and was not. These boundaries did not fit what he knew to be the nature of God. He knew that God was everywhere but, after his second experience, the Light was not everywhere. Therefore, he concluded that the Light was not God. After years of contemplation, Joe decided that the Light must be something else, another manifestation of God. He now believes that the Light is the rest of our self, the non-physical portion. When we enter and merge with the Light, we are reentering and merging with ourselves. No wonder it feels like home. It is. This is consistent with the unity nature of the non-physical universe. We are coming home; we are reentering part of our greater self. We are returned from whence we came. We are returning to God. When asked what God is, Joe said, “I don’t have a clue. God is way beyond anything I’ve experienced and can conceive” (personal communication, Oct. 22, 2000).

This research began as an exploration of near-death experiences and how others live with what they know. After each “test drive” talk to church groups and others, someone invariably asked how I was able to get so many near-death experiencers to participate in the study and talk so openly, so insightfully, and at such depth with me. The simple answer is that I was privileged. I had the credibility of the University of St. Thomas behind me. I had a methodology that made the interviews real and important to the participants. The research was to be used for scholarly pursuit. Finally, I had the advantage of being a fellow experiencer. This last reason was the hinge on which this

dissertation turned. The process of researching and writing the dissertation turned into a spiritual journey for me.

The research has been about owning my near-death-like experience. It led to discovering, adopting, and incorporating the mysterious questions imprinted on my soul that morning of Nolan's transition. The fact is that all of us experiencers have come back to the physical world. All of us have been healed. All of us are drawn, seen or unseen, toward living life differently than we had before our near-death experience. What is our journey now? We all struggle with some variation of this question. It has been a complicated journey, but the truths are simple. The complicated part is the realization that there are two reality systems at work in the same space. Duality is what we experience on the physical plane; its emphasis on separation we know well. Unity is what we encountered upon leaving our physical bodies. In unity, there is no separation, and that universe consists only of the energy of God's love. Duality and unity exist alongside each other in the same space. Duality is a subset of the unity universe. We can choose under which set of rules we will live. The simple truth of the journey is remembering and being in unity with God.

I've struggled with one facet of unity ever since I began my journey. I believe that when we leave the physical world and enter the non-physical, we are accepted into the unity of God's love. This belief is completely supported by my experience and those of the near-death experience participants. No exceptions, no rules, no discussions. I get that with every fiber of my being. Here is the struggle: Total acceptance means that there are no ultimate consequences to our acts. This suggests that we could do anything, from acts of selfless love to horrors beyond imagination, and we would always be accepted. A not-so-tiny voice in my head keeps crying out, "This doesn't seem fair!" It does not match

many religious teachings that we will be rewarded for good thoughts and works and punished for bad.

Only after much writing, struggle, and soul searching did I begin to see the answer that emerged out of the data provided by the participants. I asked myself, “Why would anyone want to commit heinous acts?” Once touched by the Light, we have an understanding of how much we are a part of God and God is a part of us, how extraordinary it is to be there, to be in communion, to be part of that Love again. Everything else pales by comparison. Recalling the feeling of being in that space realigns our souls with God.

Once I came to peace with what my soul craved, I began to realize that dreadful choices are based in fear. Fear-based choices take me away from that vibration that is God. To choose vibrations that separate me from God separates me from Love. When I make choices that distance me from the Love, the joy that is God, life doesn’t flow as well. Obstacles appear. Frustration creeps in. I feel apart from myself/God. By distilling the rules I learned from participants, I discovered the code to unlock the dilemma:

Be conscious:

I realize that life works for me when I am part of and in alignment with the Love that is God. I am consciously responsible for the vibrations of my thoughts, words, and deeds.

Be connected:

I am conscious of my choices. I choose to consciously connect and align with the unity universe. By doing so, I touch the perfection that is God. I acknowledge that everything seen and unseen is God, and all is perfect.

Be open:

I am connected to God. I am open to the direction of God's will for me. I choose to learn the language of God. (Mostly, I sense that God is not talking. The question then becomes, Am I listening? My participants say God is using the language of intuition and emotion to communicate direction.)

Be present:

I am open to God's will. I focus on the present moment so that I can receive that direction. In unity there is no time, only the all-present now. The moment I focus on the future or the past I find that God is not there. God is in the present.

Be accepting:

I am present to God's will. I accept what comes. I choose to not judge God's direction, knowing that this direction will be consistent with Love. Anything else is not of God.

Be trusting:

I accept the will of God. I trust in God and the working of God's universe.

Love:

I trust in God's love. I choose to be aligned with God's love and, therefore, I choose love, not fear.

Be free:

I have free will. I choose love. I am free to choose love. I am free to act in accordance with what I know. I am conscious and connected, open, present, accepting, trusting, loving, free. This repeats forever.



## The Link between Freedom and Unity

The third piece of the puzzle fell into place as a result of discovering the codex that arises from unity. As the experiencers described unity, they also described the freedom they felt in the non-physical world. As near-death experiencers elaborated on their new choices, they showed me how freedom learned in the non-physical world was expressed back in the physical as they interacted with self, society, and the environment. Martha introduced me to the concept of freedom rooted in her experience of no thought. She and others observed their physical bodies, the Light, and, later, the physical world, by just observing, noting what was there and making no attachments or judgments about it. The Indian mystic J. Krishnamurti, in his book, *On Freedom* (1991), said:

If you observe, are aware of the fact and the word--the word attachment and freedom from that word, which is the feeling--then observe that feeling without any judgment--observe it--then you will see that out of that total observation there is quite a different movement taking place that is neither attachment or detachment.... (p. 127) So we are inquiring if there is freedom in its total sense, not from something to something else, or from something else to something else. We are inquiring into this whole feeling of freedom, if there is such a thing. And as long as the minds [confirm], thought, sensation, emotions identify themselves with a particular object, a piece of furniture, a human being, or a belief, is there freedom? Obviously not. The moment you identify yourself with something you are denying freedom. (p. 131)

Freedom, as Krishnamurti describes it, is a sensation that does not involve thought. It is a state of being out of which actions are taken. Unity is such an environment. Most near-death experiencers experienced “no-time” when they were purely observing and experiencing the non-physical world. I contend that that is the space in which they learned how to be free. Experiencers learned how to be without past memory, rules, authority, or identification with any concept. This learning subsequently became part of who they were and was brought forward into the physical world. They learned to act without motive, out of love.

Freedom can only result in love. They are one and the same. The only time another emotion, such as anger, can enter our consciousness is when there is a separation between the observer and the observed. When this occurs, past associations are present from which judgments can be made. Therefore, staying fully present enables us to experience freedom and love. Remember Martha's place of the void? This was the place of unmanifested potential. This was a place where thought existed without an object. The void was not "empty," but filled with the energy of God that Holly described as existing among all things. This was the place where Martha experienced her conscious self without anything to which to attach it. This was a place of pure being-ness, of freedom. I contend that freedom requires inner space, a place where I can be free to observe the world around and within me and not be constricted by the authority of the past, society, or the environment. The challenge, once discovered, is to not fill that space with judgment, opinions, or named memory as we live the moment.

The opposite of love is fear. If there is no time in unity, there is no fear. Fear can be present only when we project our behavior forward to some undesired consequence. If the future does not exist, there can be no fear of it. I now am able to choose to live out of the freedom of the present moment.

Krishnamurti contends that freedom is dangerous:

Environment, which is society, is destroying freedom. It does not want a person who is free, it wants the saints, the reformers who would modify, bolster, uphold the social institutions . . . . [A free person] has got rid of all ambition, envy, greed, fear, so that he has a mind that is young, fresh, new, so as to investigate, to find out what is beyond all the things that man has put together. (1991, p. 67)

These persons are dangerous because they are not ordinary. They challenge social conventions. In response, society worships them, persecutes them, or is indifferent to them. Near-death experiencers create non-ordinary persons. Most want to be able to fit

into society and have a pleasant life with others. Freedom, as defined by Krishnamurti and near-death experiencers, may be considered antithetical to that desire.

The unnerving part of pursuing freedom and unity is that I have to destroy the structures of my mind, both from without and within, in order to be free. I have to be willing to challenge all I have been taught in order to be free enough to be open to God's love. I have to continually ask myself if I am willing to live with the consequences of such beliefs and actions. Am I willing to embrace this experience? Or, am I willing to acknowledge the anger I feel for not fitting in? As Hannah said, "My whole life just unraveled in a single week." I cannot go back to life as it was. Castaneda said that effects of non-ordinary reality had:

. . . a peculiar quality of undermining the certainty that the reality of everyday life was implicitly real, the certainty that I, in matters of ordinary reality, could provide myself with consensus indefinitely. Up to that point the course of my apprenticeship seemed to have been a continuous building toward the collapse of that certainty. (1968, p. 252)

### Conscious Commitment

Having come to this juncture, I confronted the fourth puzzle piece: my decision on what I wanted to happen next. The outcome depended on what I'd learned and chosen about how to be. Martha introduced me to unity and made its possibility real. Zachary showed me what it was like to be held and united in the hand of God. John helped me to understand how you get what you need. Holly gave me strength to stand in my own truth and not judge others for doing the same. She also defined for me how energy is the substance of an interconnected universe. Franklin blessed me with the knowledge that freedom is in the creativity of relationships. And Zachary brought me into the forever present to realize that my whole life is the great thing that was going to happen.

I now know that this dualistic universe is a part of the unity universe. With that understanding comes the realization that I am part of a generative, creative universe. I can choose which universe will hold the rules from which I create my reality. Each one works. Each, at its essence, gives off a different vibration. I assume responsibility for generating the energy that will be responded back to me in kind. I am opting to make that generation a conscious choice. For me to live life consciously means for me to continuously choose love. To choose fear-based actions leads me on a path I don't want to take. I will not allow unconscious fear to dictate the kind of energy I put out.

Kathy was struggling with the choices that she had made to create the life she wanted. In frustration, she blurted out, "Who owns me?" In that moment, she realized that she was taking conscious control of the choices she was making. With great relief, she--and all of us--can now choose to make joy and love the basis from which we make decisions. My new astrolabe is this: "Everything is One in God's Love. The soul of Love is freedom."

Fear is the energy which contracts,  
Closes down, draws in, runs, hides, hoards, harms.  
Love is the energy which expands,  
Opens up, sends out, stays, reveals, shares, heals.  
Fear wraps our bodies in clothing; love allows us to stand naked.  
Fear clings to and clutches all that we have; love gives all that we have away.  
Fear holds close, love holds dear.  
Fear grasps; love lets go.  
Fear rankles, love soothes.  
Fear attacks, love amends.

*-- Neale Donald Walsch*

Castaneda ends his book by saying that his research:

. . . was my attempt to understand [don Juan's] teachings. I felt it was imperative to prove, if only to myself, that they were not an oddity . . . [Don Juan's] teachings . . . had an internal cohesion, a logical sequence that enabled me to view the entire phenomenon in the light that dispelled the sense of bizarreness which was the mark of all I had experienced . . . [What I discovered] was a system of

logical thought from which don Juan drew meaningful inferences for his day-to-day life, a vastly complex system of beliefs in which inquiry was an experience leading to exultation (1968, p. 238).

This dissertation ends similarly. My journey has been the same. To understand what had happened to me nearly two decades ago, I had to understand what participants experienced in their near-death and return. They held the puzzle pieces that, viewed collectively, offered wisdom beyond expectations. I felt it was imperative to prove, if only to myself, that this wisdom was not an oddity. In fact, experiencers' insights led me to construct a logical and integrated cosmology that explains the nature of our response to the near-death experience and the freedom it generates. This knowledge profoundly changes how I reference the world. Things are different for me. Inquiry into that difference does lead to exultation and, for me, the peace that comes with understanding.

If I can leave the reader with one implication, it is that existence is not what it seems. The world is not what it seems. It's magnificently more complex than we could possibly imagine. The way we put it together, even reality is not what it seems. Each of us, at one point or another, has to construct our internal astrolabe. This dissertation has brought me to that realization.

## AFTERWORD

### Near-death Experiences and Leadership

“It is the theory which decides what we can observe.”

--*Albert Einstein*

During the defense of this dissertation, my committee wanted to know how this research impacted my understanding of leadership, for the implications of near-death experiences reach far beyond personal experience. (I was, after all, in the University of St. Thomas's leadership program. It was not an unreasonable request.) Having written a chapter on this subject and withdrawn it due to the constraints of my theoretical framework, I related my findings. The committee then requested that I include a short summary in an afterword so that readers could visit some of the leadership implications suggested by the dissertation. This afterword briefly summarizes the work of Joseph Jaworski and Margaret Wheatley and uses their insights to augment the Manifest Leadership model arising from this study.

Joseph Jaworski, in his book *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*, explores the nature of synchronicity through an examination of his personal and working lives. A mixture of autobiography, observation, and interviews with philosophers and physicists, his book offers a new definition of leadership and shows how it works given his understanding of the underlying operating structure of our universe.

Jaworski identifies three shifts in thinking that must take place in order to establish a leadership style that fosters synchronicity. The first is to move our mental model from a mechanistic orientation to one where leaders understand that the universe is

open, dynamic, interconnected, and full of living qualities. The second is to understand that relationship is our organizing principle. The nature of that relationship defines how we envision and experience the world around us. “Once we see relationship as the organizing principle of the universe, we begin to accept one another as legitimate human beings. This is when, as Martin Buber said, we begin to see ourselves and others in an I and Thou relationship” (p. 184). The third is that the nature of commitment moves from doing everything necessary to make events happen to one where commitment begins not with will, but with willingness. Jaworski believes that leaders must have the willingness and commitment to stand in a state of surrender, listening and acting on the inner voice that guides us on our journey through life. It is only through these three shifts in mind and action that we can create a domain where synchronicity and balance can be achieved.

Point for point, this study’s participants identified and supported the three necessary conditions for Jaworski’s fundamental shift of mind. When presented with this confirming data in a conference call, both Jaworski and the co-author of his next book, professor Otto Scharmer of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan School of Business, were struck by the similarities. Both reinforced the importance of developing and putting into practice a model of leadership based on an open universe, interconnected, based on relationships, and committed to trusting in the unfolding nature of the universe. “If we fail [in making the shift to this model of leadership], I fear for our planet,” Jaworski stated (personal communication, Feb. 21, 2001).

Margaret Wheatley, in her book *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about organization from an orderly universe*, explores leadership by identifying the underlying structure of the universe from the scientific perspective. She suggests that the most effective leadership style conforms to the inherent qualities of nature’s structure.

Wheatley proves her point by exploring, through interview and literature, the current understanding of quantum physics, self-organizing systems, and chaos theory.

Throughout the book, she discusses the philosophical and methodological issues raised by this New Science.

Her results, although more technical than Jaworski's, mimic his understanding. Wheatley's believes that space in the quantum world is not a lonely void, but thought to be filled with fields--invisible, non-material structures that are the basic substance of the universe. These fields exert influence and bring matter into form. These fields are considered real, although they are non-material.

Noting contributions of physicist John Archibald Wheeler, Wheatley asserts that the whole universe is a participatory process, where we create the present and the past with our observations. The existence of observers who notice what is going on impart reality to the origin of everything.

Wheatley addresses the unity nature of the non-physical universe by noting that "the quantum universe is enacted only in an environment rich in relationship. Nothing happens in the quantum world without something encountering something else....It [is] an important shift in focus—to look behind the small, discrete, visible structures to an invisible world filled with mediums of connections" (p. 49).

Wheatley writes that these fields and connections are the template upon which physical matter coalesces to bring physical form into the world:

Information organizes matter into form, resulting in physical structures....We haven't noticed information as structure because all around us are physical forms that we can see and touch and that beguile us into confusing the system's structure with its physical manifestation. Yet the real system, that which endures and evolves, is energy. Matter flows through it, assuming different forms as required. When the information changes (as when disturbances increase), a new structure materializes. (p. 104)



Because physical matter moves through ideas/information, it is critical that the system remain open to disturbances. These variations create new energy for new ideas, not letting the system reach equilibrium. This stasis fosters entropy. “If there is nothing new, or if the information that exists merely confirms what is, then the result will be death” (p. 104).

Fundamental to all self-organizing systems, Wheatley writes, is the principle of self-reference. Environmental disturbances create the need for the system to respond and change in a way that remains consistent with itself in that environment. “Self-reference is what facilitates orderly change in turbulent environments. In human organizations, a clear sense of identity—of the values, traditions, aspirations, competencies, and culture that guide the operation—is the real source of independence from the environment” (p. 94). As the system changes, it does so by referring to itself; “Whatever future form it takes will be consistent with its already established identity” (p. 94).” For individuals, this means that behavior springs from beliefs.

Lastly, Wheatley addresses freedom by quoting Jantsch. “The natural dynamics of simple dissipative structures teach the optimistic principle of which we tend to despair in the human world: *the more freedom in self-organization, the more order*” (Jantsch in Wheatley 1980, 40: italics added).” She concludes that organizations that are self-organizing are stable over time.

Near-death experiencers confirm Wheatley’s exploration of the quantum universe as paralleling what they know to be true in their encounter with the non-physical world. They describe a place of unity (interconnectedness) where unmanifested potential (fields) intersects with heartfelt desires (information) to create physical matter reality. The generative nature of this universe implies that what we believe and intend becomes

manifest in the physical (matter flowing through ideas). When we change, we do so out of what we know to be true about our core nature and the nature of the unity universe (self-referencing).

How has this research impacted my understanding of leadership? The nature of leadership changes with changes in the belief structure of the individual. When experiencers discover that the nature of the unity universe is love and freedom, they change. They develop new relationships to everyone and everything around them. They choose a path where leadership is defined as being-ness. For who they are in the world defines what manifests around them. Figure 3 depicts a model of what I believe is the nature of “Manifest Leadership.”

This model begins with the environment acting on an individual in some way. A Manifest Leader’s “job” is to know thyself. Incumbent upon individuals is to know the nature of their spiritual selves as well their personality selves. The questions then arise, “Who am I?” and “What world do I live in?” They choose to live either in the dualistic universe or the unity universe where all is an aspect of God’s love. Then comes the heart of the matter. A decision must be made again to trust, to have the courage, to believe in the subtle nature of this universe’s construction. That being done, Manifest Leaders then create a belief system where heart, mind, and spirit are consistent with God’s love. The unity universe contributes the awareness of its unbounded interconnectedness and the freedom it creates. In this place, options are open, encouraged, and fostered.

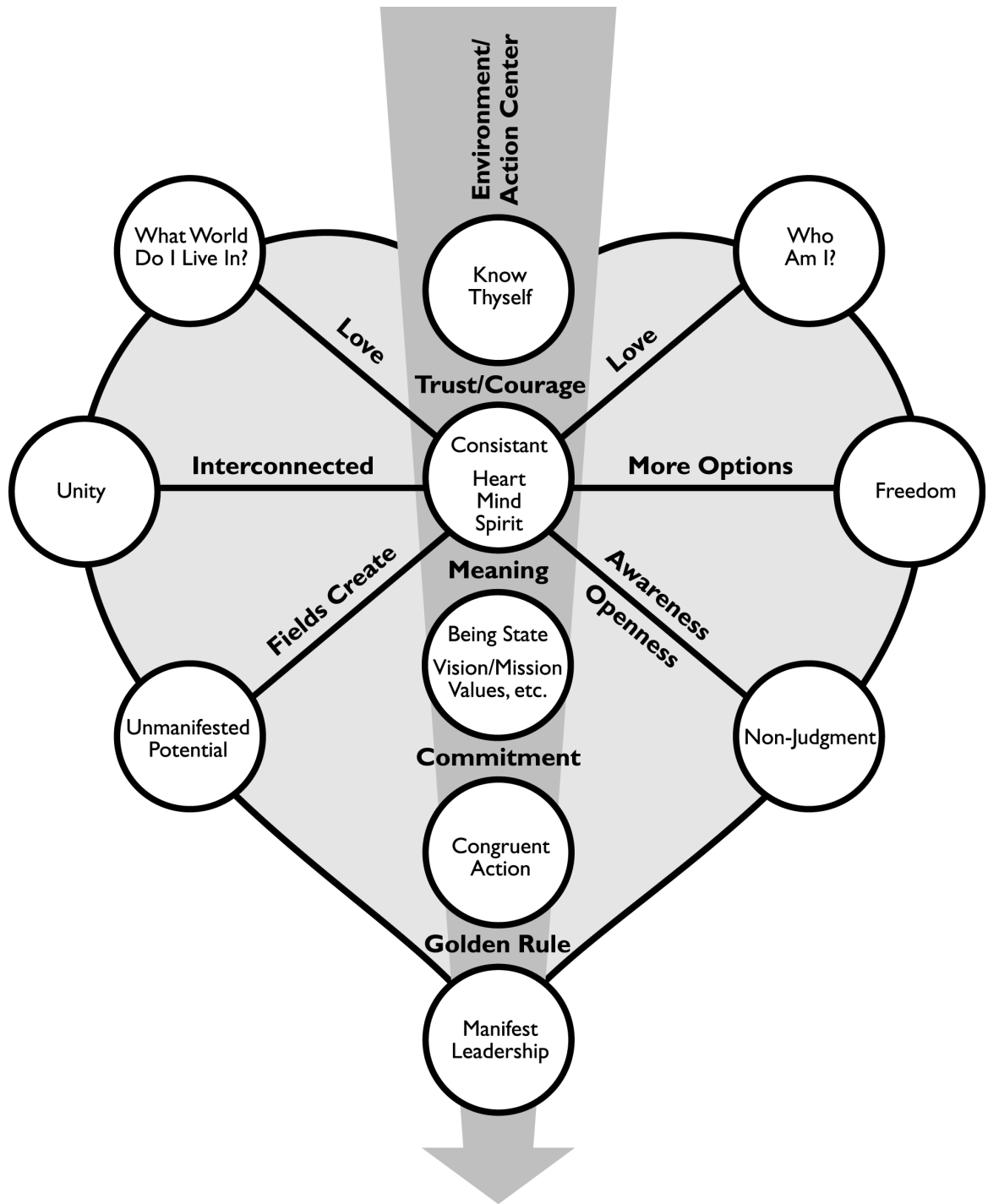


Figure 3. Model of the nature of “Manifest Leadership”

Further down the action center, leaders pursue personal meaning-making by establishing who they wish to be in the world. This state of being, a set of values, traditions, aspirations, competencies, and culture form the framework for their personal field. This commitment to the “being state” allows them to act in a way congruent with their beliefs.

When persons choose to act (or intend to act), they intersect the field of unmanifested potential, allowing physical form to come into being consistent with their desire. Non-judgment allows leaders the awareness of the whole and the openness to keep the system active and growing.

I believe that the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” is less a stand on morality than a karmic prescriptive. Near-death experiencers read this as “What you put out is what you get back.” The lesson for leaders is that they should act in a way consistent with the Golden Rule and the universe will manifest what is in their best interests and in God’s plan.

I like this model for several reasons. First is that it recognizes the nature of the relationship between belief and action. Second is that I believe consistency of behavior and beliefs is paramount. Wheatley wrote,

We need, therefore, to be very serious about this work of field creation, because fields give form to our words. If we have not bothered to create a field of vision that is coherent and sincere, people will encounter other fields, the ones we have created unintentionally or casually. It is important to remember that space is never empty. If we don’t fill it with coherent messages, if we say one thing but do another, then we create dissonance in the very *space* [italics in original] of the organization. As employees bump up against contradicting fields, their behavior mirrors those contradictions. (p. 56-7)

Manifest Leadership uses fields to manage. These fields are created from values and vision, rather than from traditional authority, which so often uses fear-based behavior.

What you create you get more of.

Third is that the model is self-referential. Consistency in thought, word, and deed makes for fields and leaders, which are easy to follow because of their clarity. It also allows leaders to create responsibility by being conscious of what it is they desire. Self-referential behavior gives each individual the freedom to create the world they need to respond to the environment, knowing that the whole system is stable and has integrity.

Fourth is that this model is consistent with the data from near-death experiencers, with the physicists, with the philosophers, and with what my experience tells me is true.

A universe conceived in love and freedom must use these characteristics to further its own growth. As Wheatley puts forth,

There is irony here. Those who try to convince us to manage from values or vision, rather than from traditional authority, usually scare us. Their organizations seem devoid of the management controls that ensure order. Values, vision, ethics—these seem too soft, many feel, too translucent to serve as management tools. How can they create the kind of order we crave in the face of chaos? Newton's world justified those fears because it was a world of pieces spinning off in all directions. But if we look past Newton, if we change our field of vision, we see a world of greater, more subtle forms of order. (p. 57)

Ironic it is. How have we evolved so that love, openness, connectedness, and freedom are scary management practices? Persons who have died and come back have much to show us about living.

## References

- Atwater, P. M. H. (1980). *I died three times in 1977*. Harrisonburg, VA: Shenandoah Press.
- Atwater, P. M. H. (1988). *Coming back to life: The after-effects of the near-death experience*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Atwater, P. M. H. (1995). *Beyond the light: The mysteries and revelations of near-death experiences*. New York: Avon Books.
- Atwater, P. M. H. (1996). *Beyond the light: What isn't being said about near-death experiences*. New York: Carol Publishing Group.
- Atwater, P. M. H. (1996). *Brain shift: Using the near-death experience as a theoretical model to explore the transformation of human consciousness*. Charlottesville, VA: Author.
- Atwater, P. M. H. (1999). *Subtext for "children of the new millennium."* New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Atwater, P. M. H., & Morgan, D. (2000). *The complete idiot's guide to near-death experiences*. Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books.
- Berman, P. (1996). *The journey home: What near-death experiences and mysticism teach us about the gift of life*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Blackmore, S. (1993). *Dying to live: Science and the near-death experience*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (1992). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Carr, C. (1993). Death and near-death: A comparison of Tibetan and Euro-American experiences. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 25, 59-118.

Carr, P. H. (1996). Beyond the near-death experience: An investigation of the effects of near-death experiences (Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology, 1996). Dissertation Abstracts International, 57-05B, AAG9629993.

Castaneda, C. (1968). The teachings of don Juan: A Yaqui way of knowledge. New York: Pocket Books.

Charon, J. (1998). Symbolic interactionism: An introduction, an interpretation, an integration. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Denzin, N. K. (1989). Interpretive interactionism. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Devereux, J. M. (1995). Living life after encountering the light: A phenomenological exploration of the meaning of a near-death experience (Doctoral dissertation, The Union Institute, 1995). Dissertation Abstracts International, 56-05B, AAI9529106.

Dole, G. F. (Nov. 11, 1998). Emanuel Swedenborg: An introduction to his life and writings [on-line]. Available: [www.swedenborg.com/emanuel.html](http://www.swedenborg.com/emanuel.html)

Evans-Wentz, W. Y. (1960). The Tibetan book of the dead. New York: Oxford University Press.

Faulkner, R. (1994). The Egyptian book of the dead. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

Gallup, G., Jr. (1982). Adventures in immortality: A look beyond the threshold of death. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Gear, W. M. (1997). Coyote summer. New York: Forge Books.

Greyson, B. (1997). The near-death experience as a focus of clinical attention. The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 185, 327-334.

Guba, D., & Lincoln, Y. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Hicks, Ester. (2000, July 15) Presentation given in Cincinnati, OH. Retrieved April 25, 2002, from <http://abraham-hicks.com>

- Hoffman, R. M. (1995). Disclosure needs and motives after a near-death experience. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 13, 237-266.
- Jacobs, J. (1992). Religious experience among women and men: A gender perspective on mystical phenomena. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 4, 261-279.
- James, W. (1985). *The varieties of religious experience. The Gifford lectures on natural religion*, Edinburgh, 1901-1902. Cambridge, MA, and London.
- Johnson, E. T. (1996). Does a near-death experience alter personality? (Master's thesis, Texas A & M University-Kingsville, 1996). *Masters Abstracts International*, 35-01, AAG1381513.
- Jaworski, J. (1996). *Synchronicity: The inner path of leadership*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Kason, Y. (2000). *Farther Shores: Exploring how near-death kundalini and mystical experiences transform ordinary lives*. Toronto: HarperCollins.
- Kellehear, A. (1993). Culture, biology, and the near-death experience: A reappraisal. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 181, 148-156.
- Kellehear, A. (1996). *Experiences Near Death: Beyond medicine and religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Krishnamurti, J., & Cadogan, M. (Ed.) (1991). *On freedom*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Lincoln, B. (1989). *Discourse and the construction of society: Comparative studies of myth, ritual, and classification*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Living Bible, The: *The one year bible* (1985) Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House.
- Lundahl, C. R. (1993). Lessons from near-death experiencers for humanity. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 12, 5-16.
- Manahan, V. (1991). *Education of adult children for caregiving duties to aging parents*. doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.



- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1995). *Designing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- McMoneagle, J. (1993). *Mind trek: Exploring consciousness, time, and space through remote viewing*. Norfolk, VA: Hampton Roads.
- Mitchell, J. (1990). *Revisioning educational leadership: A phenomenological approach*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Monroe, R. (1971). *Journeys out of the body*. New York: Doubleday.
- Moody, R. (1975). *Life after life: The investigation of a phenomenon--survival of bodily death*. New York: Bantam.
- Moody, R. (1977). *Reflections on life after life*. Covington, GA: Mockingbird Books.
- Moody, R., & Perry, P. (1992). *Coming back: A psychiatrist explores past life journeys*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Morris, W. (Ed.) (1975). *American Heritage dictionary of the English language*. New York: American Heritage.
- Morrison, J. (2002). *The Astrolabe: An instrument with a past and a future*. Retrieved April 25, 2002 from <http://www.astrolabes.org>
- Morse, M., & Perry, P. (1992). *Transformed by the light*. New York: Ivy Books.
- Murphy, G. (1945a). An outline of survival evidence. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 39, 2-34.
- Murphy, G. (1945b). Difficulties confronting the survival hypothesis. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 39, 67-94.
- Murphy, G. (1945c). Field theory and survival. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 39, 181-209.

- Osis, K. (1961). *Deathbed observations by physicians and nurses*. New York, NY: Parapsychological Foundation.
- Osis, K., & Haraldsson, E. (1977). Deathbed observations of physicians and nurses: A cross-cultural study. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 71, 237-259.
- Rawlings, M. (1978). *Beyond death's door*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Redwood, D. (Nov. 11, 1998). *On Death and Dying* [online]. Available: [www.doubleclick.com/kubler.html](http://www.doubleclick.com/kubler.html)
- Rhodes, L. (1982). The near-death experience enlarged by Swedenborg's vision. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 2, 15-35.
- Ring, K. (1980). *Life at death: A scientific investigation of the near-death experience*. New York, NY: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan.
- Ring, K. (1982). *Life at death: A scientific investigation of the near-death experience*. New York: Quill.
- Ring, K. (1984). *Heading toward omega: In search of the meaning of the near-death experience*. New York, NY: William Morrow.
- Ring, K. (1992). *The omega project: near-death experiences, UFO encounters, and mind at large*. New York: William Morrow.
- Ring, K., & Cooper, S. (1999). *Mindsight: Near-death and out of body experiences in the blind*. Palo Alto, CA: William James Center for Consciousness Studies.
- Ring, K., & Valarino, E. (1998). *Lessons from the light: What we can learn from near-death experience*. Reading, MA: Perseus Books.
- Ross, B. (1979). The same old story: A historical perspective. In R. Kastenbaum (Ed.), *Between life and death* (pp. 29-44). New York, NY: Springer.
- Sabom, M. B. (1982). *Recollection of death: A medical investigation*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.

Sabom, M. B. (1998). *Light and death*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Schorer, C. E. (1985-86). Two Native American near-death experiences. *Omega*, 16, 111-113.

Siegel, R. K., & Herschman, A. E. (1984). Hashish near-death experiences. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 4, 69-86.

Springer, R. R. (n.d.). *Intra muros: "My dream of heaven."* Forest Grove, OR: Book Searchers.

Stevenson, I. (1977). Research into the evidence of man's survival after death. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 165, 152-170.

Sutherland, C. (1990). Changes in religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices following near-death experiences: An Australian study. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 9, 21-31.

Swedenborg, E. (1928). *Heaven and hell*. New York, NY: Swedenborg Foundation.

Taylor, R. (1975). *Witness from beyond*. South Portland, ME: Forward Books.

Udinsky, B. F., Osterlind, S.J., & Lynch, S.W. (1981). *Evaluation resource handbook: Gathering, analyzing, reporting data*. San Diego, CA: EdITS Publishers.

Walker, B. A., & Serdahely, W. J. (1990). Historical perspective on near-death phenomena. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 9, 105-121.

Wells, A. D. (1993). Reincarnation beliefs among near-death experiencers. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 12, 17-34.

West, D. J. (1948). The investigation of spontaneous cases. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 8, 264-300.

Wheatley, M. (1994). *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about organization from an orderly universe*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Wren-Lewis, J. (1994). Aftereffects of near-death experiences: A survival mechanism hypothesis. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 26, 107-115.

Zaleski, C. (1987). *Otherworld journeys: Accounts of near-death experience in medieval and modern times*. New York: Oxford University Press.

## Appendix A

Number	Age When Interviewed	Age at Event	Male or Female	Notes
1.	55	50	M	Heart attack
2.	36	16	F	Cancer
3.	40	23	F	Suicide
4.	58	56	F	Heart attack
5.	39	28	F	Allergic reaction
6.	59	29	F	Childbirth
7.	45	15	F	Allergic reaction
8.	39	21	M	Burned
9.	50	19	M	Gunshot
10.	70	29	M	Car accident
11.	74	50	F	Childbirth
12.	52	42	F	Surgery
13.	46	26, 31	F	Childbirth, surgery
14.	70	19	M	Railroad accident
15.	54	33	F	Childbirth
16.	49	40, 40, 40	F	Septic shock
17.	57	55	F	Electrolyte imbalance
18.	38	15	F	Farm accident
19.	49	29	F	Poisoning
20.	39	18	F	Car accident
21.	48	24	M	Poisoning
22.	46	29	F	Lupus
23.	33	19, 29	F	Surgery, surgery
Total	1,146	825		
Average	49.8			N = 23
Average		30.6		N = 27
			Female = 17	74%
			Male = 6	26%

### Composition of Participants

### Leading Causes Precipitating a Near-death Experience

Childbirth = 4	Heart attack = 2	Other = 11
Surgery = 4	Allergic reaction = 2	
	Car accident = 2	
	Poisoning = 2	
Total = 27		

## Appendix B

### Intake Form for Potential Interviewees

#### PERSONAL

Name:

Address:

Home phone:

Work phone:

Contact restrictions:

#### CRITERIA

Degree of experience:

Willingness to share:

Ability to recall:

Ability to articulate:

Time away from experience:

Experience with the Light:

Culture:

Gender:

Age at event:

Age now:

Person willing to corroborate:

Is there physical evidence of near-death experience?

What type?

## Appendix C

### Recruiting Advertisement

HOME Magazine / Jan. 26-Feb. 1, 1999 / First Section / Page 5

#### **HAVE YOU HAD A NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE?**

Please assist me with a Near-Death Study. Adult volunteers are needed for my doctoral research project at the University of St. Thomas. Please call for more information.

Confidential, professional and with caring spirit.

Scott Taylor, M.M., M.S.C.

**507-345-8363** or leave a message at **651-962-5283**.

---

## Appendix D

### Consent Form

#### **University of St. Thomas**

You are invited to participate in a research study of Near-Death Experiences (NDEs). You were selected as a possible participant because you responded to an announcement of the study, or you returned a postcard identifying yourself as an NDEr to the staff of a medical facility, or you were referred to the study project by an acquaintance or a person who is also in the study. No service agency or service provider released your name. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The Graduate School of Education at the University of St. Thomas, 2115 Summit Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105-1096, is conducting this study.

#### **Background Information:**

This study of the Near-Death Experience is to determine why experiencers have such a changed view of the nature of the universe and how that changed view has affected how they relate to and live in the world post-experience.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things. You will be interviewed about your NDE and the effect it has had on your outlook and your life. The interview will last approximately 90 minutes. If necessary, you may be asked to participate in one or more subsequent interview(s) to clarify and expand upon topics previously addressed. With your permission, the interview will be audiotaped for accurate transcription of your responses.

#### **Risks and Benefits of being in the Study**

The study has no physical risks. Some may find relating their NDE story emotional. Should you recognize and wish to receive counseling for NDE related issues, attached is a list of counselors / therapists who have acknowledged their willingness to meet with near-death experiencers who request their services. Payment for such services is your sole responsibility.

The benefit to participation is being able to tell your story, in detail, to an informed, understanding and sympathetic ear. There are no other benefits.



**Compensation:**

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researchers will have access to the records. Tape recordings will be kept in the same file and only researchers and bonded transcriptionists will have access to them. Tapes will be erased after ten years.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Scott Taylor. You may ask any questions have now. If you have questions later, you may contact either Scott Taylor at 507-345-8363 or Bruce Kramer, Ph.D., his advisor, at 612-962-5294 (University of St. Thomas).

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature of Study Participant

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

List of counselors available to assist with near-death issues:

**Metro:**

Bruce Macbeth, PhD.  
1360 Energy Park Dr.  
St. Paul MN 55108  
612-644-2267, ext. 3

Dennis Wynne, LICSW  
1360 Energy Park Dr.  
St. Paul MN 55108  
612-644-2267

**Mankato / St. Peter:**

Dave Andros  
Andros Family Services  
512 Mulberry  
Mankato MN 56001  
Or  
722 Sunrise  
St. Peter MN 56082  
507-931-4160

Diane Caspers  
423 W. 7<sup>th</sup>  
Mankato MN 56001  
507-387-5586

Karen Ortloff MS LP  
201 N. Broad St., #305  
Mankato MN 56001  
507-345-4679

Sharalyn Tschida (Sheri)  
512 Mulberry St.  
Mankato MN 56001  
507-381-1072

## Appendix E

### Follow-up Letter

Dear

I thought it was time I write and update you on the status and progress of Near-Death Experience research in which you participated.

My dissertation advisory committee met with me in late January. Hearing good preliminary results, they recommended that I expand my research from 8 to 20 participants. I have just completed the last of these interviews.

The next phase is for me to select a few participants to interview again for clarification and/or corroboration. Those selected may need to supply me with documents and the opportunity to interview friends, relatives or spouses.

By summer, I should be in a position to write a preliminary draft of my results, which I will share with you. You may remember from our conversation that I look forward to your comments on my preliminary findings so that both of us can be sure I have represented your experience faithfully. I also look forward to your comments on all my findings in relationship to your own experience. Look for this draft to arrive to you by late summer.

Some persons I have interviewed have having a hard time adjusting to life after their Near-Death Experience. I have attached a list of counselors that have indicated to me that they would be open to working with Near-Death Experiencers. This is not a recommendation, but an opportunity if you feel you would like to talk. The cost of this counseling is your sole responsibility.

Thanks again for agreeing to participate in my study. The information I'm gathering is wonderful. Thanks to you.

Sincerely,

Scott M. Taylor

P.S. Please keep me updated on any change of address or phone number. I can be reached at RR1 Box 236C, St. Peter, MN 56082, 507-345-8363 (h), 507-354-5858 (w) or [aware@prairie.lakes.com](mailto:aware@prairie.lakes.com).

List of counselors available to assist with near-death issues:

**Metro:**

Bruce Macbeth, PhD.  
1360 Energy Park Dr.  
St. Paul MN 55108  
612-644-2267, ext. 3

Dennis Wynne, LICSW  
1360 Energy Park Dr.  
St. Paul MN 55108  
612-644-2267

**Mankato / St. Peter:**

Dave Andros  
Andros Family Services  
512 Mulberry  
Mankato MN 56001  
Or  
722 Sunrise  
St. Peter MN 56082  
507-931-4160

Diane Caspers  
423 W. 7<sup>th</sup>  
Mankato MN 56001  
507-387-5586

Karen Ortloff MS LP  
201 N. Broad St., #305  
Mankato MN 56001  
507-345-4679

Sharalyn Tschida (Sheri)  
512 Mulberry St.  
Mankato MN 56001  
507-381-1072

## Appendix F

### List of Guiding Questions

#### **Personal History:**

Name

Mailing address

Phone number (note if unlisted)

Highest grade level attained in school

Major subjects or interests in school

Present Occupation

Present religious affiliation and/or spiritual practice

Marital / partner status (note if divorced)

Give ages of any children/grandchildren

Own home or rent

Status of health

Hobbies, extra activities and interests (note special projects)

Present age

#### **Near-Death Experience:**

Age when episode occurred

Place where episode occurred

Others present (list name and relationship)

Physical circumstances of event

Subjective experience of event (describe what you can remember)

Which general classes of places are experienced?

Which general classes of events are experienced?

What are the specific form of places and events?

What is the sequence of events?

What is the sequence of places?

What is the affective tone of the experience?

What are the cognitive/sensory characteristics?

What is the depth of experience as a function of closeness or perceived closeness to death?

Was there an intent (suicide/non-suicide)?

What lessons were learned during the personal life-history review and personally meaningful symbols?

What were the personally varying responses of the “other world” to the NDEr?

What were the learned, subculture or culture-specific beliefs and symbols?

Was there culture-specific perceptions not learned?

Is there a panhuman biology?

What is the nature of time?

What is freedom?

What is the nature of thought?

What is the role and nature of the Light?

Afterword, what was your initial reaction?

Did you tell anyone about your subjective experience?

If so, who and how often?

Was any of your experience ever verified?

If so, what was verified, how long it took to verify, and how verified it?

**Aftereffects:**

Initially, how did this experience affect you?

If you told others, how did their reaction affect you?

Did manifestations from or because of your experience continue to occur afterwards (e.g. sudden or continued “visitations,” unusual lights, voices, hauntings, vivid replays of the event, etc.)?

If so, please detail.

If you can, compare your life “before? Versus “after” the event—noting any differences.

If you can, compare others reaction to you and your relationship to them – using the same before and after format.

**Specifics:**

Did your mind work differently afterward: Explain if yes.

Was there any difference in your faculties? Explain if yes.

Did your intelligence level change? Explain if yes.

Was there any difference in flavor of and preference for food and drink afterward? Explain if yes.

Did the affect of light change afterwards? Sunshine? Explain if yes.

Did the affect of sound change afterwards? Music? Explain if yes.

Did your energy affect electricity or electronic equipment? Explain if yes.

Was there any difference in your physical body and how it functions, or in your appearance, afterwards? Explain is yes.

Did your relationship to animals/nature change afterward?

Did your relationship to your parents and siblings change?

Did your relationship to friends and strangers change?

Did your experience in school with your teachers/coaches change? (work)

If you had a counselor or therapist in the years following, was that helpful, did you tell that person about your episode?

What was your health like afterward and in the years that followed.

What was your spiritual/religious experience like afterward?

What was the intuitive/psychic and dream world like for you afterward?

How have you dealt with any desire to return to where you once were?

Do you have a sense of “mission”? What are you doing about it?

How do you handle work, money matters, and ownership?

How do you now handle stress, conflicts, and negativity?

Did any changes you experienced fade with time, remain, or increase over the years?

How are we to relate to the physical world?

What is leadership?

How has your behavior changed upon your return?

What do you differently than before? Why?

How is this related to the “way the world works over there?”

Do you have anxiety about death?

Please share your present philosophy of life and the extent your episode had in shaping it.



## Appendix G

### Comment Letter

Dear

Hi! Enclosed is the data chapter from my dissertation on Near-Death Experiences. I promised you when I'd written this portion, I would send you a copy for review and comment. Here it is.

I'm sorry this took so long. "Good research takes time," my advisor told me. That and the demands of living seem to have a way of conspiring to slow down the process.

Here is where you can help me. I've enclosed a draft copy of my data chapter. I would like you to read it and respond with your comments. Please write, scribble or draw pictures all over it with the enclosed colored pen (it is easier to see your comments that way). I'm interested in several things:

1. Did I represent your comments well?
2. Do any of your comments need more explanation or additions?
3. What do you think of what the others said?
4. Any thoughts on my introductions and commentary?
5. Does the format enhance or hinder your reading / understanding of the interviews?
6. As you thought about your near-death experience since our conversation, how do you live with what you know?
7. Any additional insights?

Respond to one or all of these as your interest and time allow. Your thoughts will be incorporated in the final draft and I look forward to seeing them. Don't worry about hurting my feelings. You're my editor. That's what editors are for...to get it right.

Please respond as quickly as you can. I would like to have your comments back by the end of January. February 15<sup>th</sup> is the last possible date. Use the self-addressed stamped envelope.

Thanks for waiting and *Thanks* for commenting!

Sincerely,

Scott Taylor

P.S. As promised, I gave everyone a new name and some I gave a new gender. I hope you like your new personality. It is:

## Appendix H

### Martha's Drawing

